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Autonomy in the spaces: teacher autonomy, scripted lessons, and the changing role of teachers

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ABSTRACT

The work of teachers has historically been highly controlled, but one area teachers have been granted considerable autonomy is in instruction and planning. Teacher autonomy is a complex concept with important implications for both the quality of instruction and teacher persistence in the field. The rise of charter management organizations (CMOs) and the increasing use of scripted lesson plans (SLPs) have introduced new institutional arrangements with unknown impacts on teachers' perceptions of autonomy. This mixed method study surveyed 155 teachers across all grade levels from CMOs, independent charter, and district schools, on their perceptions of autonomy related to lesson planning. The survey responses showed that high school teachers and those who wrote their own lessons perceived the greatest autonomy, while elementary teachers and those who received SLPs perceived the lowest. Our qualitative interviews with 17 teachers complicated these findings by demonstrating how similar organizational structures could result in very different experiences of autonomy. Relationships of trust supported stronger feelings of autonomy; without trust, planning could feel restrictive or isolating. Still, teachers found spaces of autonomy within the organizational restrictions on their work. Their reflections suggest feelings of autonomy balance the increasingly limited role of teachers' work in lesson design.

Introduction

Instruction in schools is the product of official state mandates, school guidelines, and the creativity and knowledge of individual teachers. This last element is fostered by teachers' autonomy in planning. The nature of autonomy is complex, an individual perception valued as a fundamental human need while also linked to deeper engagement, satisfaction, and empowerment in the lives of people (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet, these perceptions occur within a context of various restrictions and freedoms. For teachers, perceptions of autonomy are forged within highly ordered institutions (Ingersoll, 2009). This study explores teacher perceptions of autonomy through the experiences of a contested site in the work of teachers: lesson planning.

Lesson plans are an important element in the institution of school that not only help teachers plan for instruction but also signal preparation, competence, and effectiveness. They are important sites for the management and supervision of teachers that can be experienced as both supportive and restrictive (Narayanan, 2021). Historically, teachers have enjoyed great autonomy in their

instructional work even as other aspects of the job were heavily managed (Ingersoll, 2009). This dynamic has undergone changes with the emergence of new institutional models of school such as charter management organizations (CMOs) and the use of scripted lesson plans (SLPs). CMOs are networks of charter schools managed by centralized offices (Farrell et al., 2012), and SLPs are pre-written lesson plans that detail what and how a teacher should teach, often with literal scripts for what a teacher should say and do (Beatty, 2011). In this paper, we use a survey and interviews with select teachers in a mixed method approach to study how teacher autonomy is related to the experience of lesson planning. We learned of the various organizational structures such as coaching, planning meetings with supervisors, and mandates to submit lesson plans for review, that schools used alongside lesson plans. With participants spanning CMOs, independent charter schools, and traditional district schools, and approaches to planning ranging from scripted to individually created lessons, we show how decisions around lesson planning combine with organizational structures to shape teacher perceptions of autonomy.

Literature review

Teacher autonomy has been identified as an important construct in education. It has been shown to be related to higher job satisfaction (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020), greater teacher retention (Fernet et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), and both increased empowerment and lower stress (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). It has also been related to reduced schoolwide disciplinary problems (Ingersoll, 2009). Wilches (2007) and Parker (2015) have argued that teacher autonomy is a central characteristic of teacher professionalism, and Hopmann (2007) contends that autonomy is essential to being flexible and responsive to the complexities of teaching. Yet, even with these positive findings the definition and bounds of teacher autonomy remain unclear, a 'vexed, complex and contradictory concept' (Pitt, 2010, p. 1).

Within teaching, Ingersoll (2009) has offered one way to think of autonomy as the degree to which teachers are able to control their work. He organized the work of teachers into an administrative (e.g. class schedules, student rosters), social (e.g. school rules, behavioural expectations), and instructional domain (lesson design and delivery). He used surveys and fieldwork to show that teachers generally perceive low autonomy in their work with the exception of the instructional domain, a pattern also found in a national survey of teachers in the United Kingdom (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). These findings support the contention that schools are 'loosely coupled' organizations, ones where schools are heavily regulated in many aspects, but where teachers have considerable autonomy over what happens in their classrooms (Ingersoll, 2009).

Ingersoll's work is related to Pearson and Hall's (1993) definition of teacher autonomy as 'those perceptions that teachers have regarding whether they can control their work environment' (p. 173). This raises the question of whether teacher autonomy is an objective product of one's context or a fully subjective perception. Objective factors might include a teacher's workload, class sizes, and planning time, while a subjective perception might reflect factors such as a teacher's experience, (perceived) competence, personal history, and attitudes towards teaching (Wilches, 2007). Pitt (2010) argued that autonomy melds complexly with all of these factors to be, more than a perception, an emotional experience.

Several authors have added complexity to this view. Salokangas et al. (2020, p. 322) conceive teacher autonomy as a 'multidimensional context-dependent phenomenon', a perspective from which autonomy is viewed as actively exercised rather than passively received (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020). This suggests that teacher autonomy is highly dependent on context and personal factors; some teachers may thrive under certain conditions that appear to support autonomy, while others perceive those same conditions as being isolated or even as a means for principals to avoid their duties (Frase & Sorenson, 1992). Individual autonomy is shaped by larger institutional or professional autonomy, the degree of control granted to an institution or profession by state guidelines or collegial norms

(Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Thus, teacher autonomy can be portrayed as less a release from constraints or authority, and more 'as grounded within a complex relation to the influence and authority of individuals, ideas, and ideals we reject or claim as our own' (Pitt, 2010, p. 1).

These descriptions of autonomy as complex and multi-dimensional point to a similarity with the concept of agency. Bandura (2006) theorized agency broadly as the dynamic product of the interrelationship between intrapersonal, personal, and environmental factors. Priestley et al. (2015) described teacher agency as the creation of a field of possibilities, leading Paulsrud and Wermke (2020, p. 710) to draw a contrast by describing autonomy as what is 'actively exercised' by teachers, while teacher agency refers to 'the capacity of formulating possibilities for action'.

These nuances further suggest that autonomy should not be considered simplistically as 'good' or 'bad'. Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) argue that while it may be a source of teacher satisfaction and student success, a degree of control is necessary for ensuring equitable instruction, protecting students from harm, and even fostering cohesion among faculty. They also theorize that autonomy and control can overlap, arguing 'autonomy cannot exist in a vacuum but is always exercised within systems of constraints' (p. 203). Wermke and Forsberg (2017), for example, have argued that teachers in Sweden may interpret state frameworks as a means to reduce the complexity of their work without infringing on their profession. This hints at the 'autonomy paradox' where a degree of control is necessary to support autonomy (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). The context of accountability in education represents one way the work of teachers is controlled, and we turn now to describing this relationship.

Accountability in different national policy contexts

Teacher autonomy, with its implications of freedom from constraints, is related to accountability in teaching. The work of teachers is generally highly controlled, a fact reflected in surveys showing teachers reporting lower levels of autonomy compared to other professions (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Teachers' work can be structured through 'input regulation' - the control of the actual daily work with which teachers engage—or 'output steering— the setting of clear benchmarks that teachers must meet in exchange for discretion (Biesta, 2004; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). Input regulation can be justified on the grounds of creating uniformity and raising the collective expectations of a system, while outcome steering can grant an appearance of autonomy to educators while furthering high standards.

These different approaches are apparent across national policy contexts of accountability. Paulsrud and Wermke (2020) have argued that many English-speaking countries grant autonomy to teachers within a decentralized competitive marketplace coupled with accountability measures. Nieveen and Kuiper (2012) compared regions such as the Netherlands, California, and Scandinavian countries along a continuum of decentralization, showing that the Netherlands in particular had moved towards greater output regulations through mandated achievement tests. Lennert da Silva and Mølstad (2020) used interviews with teachers to argue that Norway's history of professionalization creates a strong sense of autonomy, whereas similar requirements feel controlling within the context of Brazil's legacy of teacher management.

A series of qualitative studies from Scandinavia have further connected national contexts and perceptions of autonomy. Erss (2018) conducted interviews with teachers in three countries and found that within different histories, similar regulations can be perceived quite differently with respect to autonomy. One group of Estonian teachers, for example, found 'complete freedom' within state-imposed limits. Through interviews with teachers, principals, and superintendents, Mausethagen and Mølstad (2015) demonstrated how Norwegian curricular prescriptions were often interpreted as supportive because they preserved individual teacher autonomy over instructional methods. Paulsrud and Wermke (2020) surveyed hundreds of teachers in Sweden and Finland to argue that the greater sense of autonomy among Finnish teachers was a result of recent state

decentralization efforts. Finland in particular has used a teacher education emphasizing the role of teacher as researcher to foster autonomy (Chung, 2023). This international perspective is interesting in light of recent changes in the US context.

Lesson planning in the context of the growth of charter schools

Much of the history of education in the United States can be characterized by control of teachers' work, sometimes extending into the design of lessons (Beatty, 2011; Bieda et al., 2020). Textbooks, for example, have been historically highly prescriptive and presented challenges for new teachers in using them as supplements rather than guides (Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988). Scripted reading programmes have also been promoted under the rationale that their implementation would best prepare students for high-stakes tests and remedy inequities (Commeyras, 2007; Dresser, 2012, Shannon, 1987; Wyatt, 2014). The use of scripted lessons in not unique to the United States; for example, 'teacher-proof' curricula have been promoted in South Africa (Fleisch et al., 2016; Shalem et al., 2017) and the United Kingdom (Kelly, 2009; Taylor, 2013). Recently, scripted lessons have been a defining feature of the charter school movement in the US (Golann, 2021).

Charter schools—publicly funded but independently run schools—began to proliferate in the 1990s out of a demand by advocates for more freedom in school management (Crawford, 2001). Charter schools represented a bargain with the state: in exchange for accepting greater accountability, schools would be granted more autonomy. Some charter schools gained traction due to their highly visible success on standardized tests with low income minority students, and they brought their schools to scale through CMOs by codifying a set of replicable management and instructional practices (Farrell et al., 2012; Raymond et al., 2023). Often, CMOs used a 'No excuses' approach with strict discipline and heavily prescribed teacher roles (Golann, 2021). Using national surveys, Oberfield (2016) found greater perceptions of autonomy among charter school teachers, validating the initial intentions of charter schools to stake out more school autonomy. But, he also found less autonomy —lower than traditional public school teachers—among teachers in schools under this new breed of tightly managed CMOs.

Many CMOs in particular have relied on scripted instruction (Golann, 2021), bringing lesson plans into the forefront of questions of teacher autonomy. SLPs have been portrayed as detrimental to teacher judgement (Leko & Brownell, 2009) and even democratic values (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). They have been attacked as promoting a narrow focus on tests that disempower teachers and limit their ability to respond to diverse students (Ede, 2006). Advocates of SLPs see them as a way to ensure quality and fidelity in executing organizational priorities, including the goal of promoting equity for all students through rigorous, quality learning materials (Doan et al., 2022). SLPs are often introduced alongside goals to raise standardized achievement scores of low-income students in particular, with an added byproduct of deepening the content knowledge of newer or underskilled teachers (Beatty, 2011; Shalem et al., 2017). However, Timberlake et al. (2017) challenged the use of scripted curricula in addressing inequities. They interviewed a group of educators who used New York State's rigorous 'EngageNY' materials and found that, while appreciative of the structure, the focus on quality resources 'neglected the wide range of factors that can impact student learning and achievement' (p. 49).

Still, others have advocated for a middle ground when it comes to SLPs. Using lesson plans, observation notes and teacher reflections, Wyatt (2014) described how teachers found spaces to insert culturally responsive strategies into mandated lesson plans. Some teachers view curriculum materials as a source for 'curation' rather than strict prescription (Sawyer et al., 2020). Commeyras (2007) advocated for teachers to approach SLPs as talented actors that can breathe life into any lesson script. These examples show that rather than a direct determinant of autonomy, SLPs can be perceived in many ways.

Our study exists at the junction of teacher autonomy, school contexts, and different lesson planning approaches. By combining surveys with qualitative interviews, we hope to gain a deeper

understanding of how perceptions of teacher autonomy relate to a teacher's context. Our participants extended across charter schools and more traditional district school contexts, and also engaged in a range of lesson planning approaches, providing us a unique opportunity to learn how teachers make sense of their autonomy through their experience with lesson planning.

Methods

Our study used a mixed methods approach. We recruited 155 graduate students enrolled in a teacher preparation programme in a major Northeastern US city. All participants were also concurrently teaching full-time in schools. Participants were from a mix of CMOs, independent charter, and district schools. Similarly, participants were distributed across elementary, middle, and high school levels, and had a range of teaching experience (Table 1).

Participants were first administered a survey that collected basic demographic and background information. Then, participants were asked to choose their lesson planning approach (Do they receive SLPs? A scope and sequence for their subject? Or do they create their lesson plans without any supporting resources?). To evaluate teacher autonomy, we used a selection of items from Pearson and Hall's (1993) teacher autonomy scale:

(1) My teaching focuses on goals and objectives I select myself.
(2) What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself.
(3) The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by me.
(4) The content and skills taught in my class are those I select

Participants responded by answering either (1) false, (2) somewhat false, (3) somewhat true, or (4) true to each statement.

We then selected 21 participants for a follow-up interview with an aim to have individuals who taught in a range of contexts. Our interviews asked participants to describe their planning process, including support and feedback they received at their school. Sometimes, they would show us actual lesson planning resources or even feedback they had received. We didn't explicitly ask our participants about autonomy until the very end, though some chose to bring up the topic on their own. We concluded by asking them to rank their autonomy as it relates to lesson planning on a scale of 1

Table 1. Survey respondents.

School Type	Elem.	Middle	High	Total
Charter Network (CMO)	39	24	16	79
Independent Charter	11	12	5	28
District Public School	4	22	22	48
Total	55	58	43	155
Years of Experience				
1st Year Teaching	45			
2nd Year Teaching	69			
3rd Year Teaching	16			
4th Year Teaching	3			
5+ Years Teaching	22			
Demographics				
Female	106			
Male	48			
Other	1			
Race*				
Alternate	17			
Asian	20			
Black	41			
Hispanic	25			
White	52			

*Participants were asked to self-identify race.

(lowest) to 10 (highest). Interviews were conducted through online video, recorded, and transcribed. We jointly analysed the transcripts to create a codebook, which we then used to code each transcript (Saldaña, 2021). We checked for consistency across researchers by independently coding the same transcript; after establishing an inter-rater reliability at 90%, we coded transcripts individually. We met frequently to check our coding and engage in a thematic analysis of the qualitative data organized by our codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Analysing survey responses

We first wanted to know the different approaches to lesson planning (Table 2). In our sample, 64 out of 155 teachers received SLPs. Of these, 50 worked in CMOs; a chi-square test for independence showed this relationship to be statistically significant, suggesting that the use of SLPs is related to working in a CMO. Teachers at the elementary level received SLPs more than other levels. Of the 65 teachers who worked in elementary schools, 33 received SLPs. Most of the elementary teachers in our sample worked

Table 2. Lesson planning approaches.

School Type	Scripted LPs	Scope & Seq	Write own LPs
CMO	50	19	10
District	3	25	20
Ind. Charter	11	8	9
Total	64	52	39

x^2 (4) = 41.270, p = .000

	School Level & LP Approach		
School Level	*Scripted LPs*	*Scope & Seq*	*Write own LPs*
Elementary	33	16	5
Middle School	24	23	11
High School	8	12	23
Total	64	52	39

x^2(6) = 32.182, p = .000

	Years of Experience & LP Approach		
Years of Experience	*Scripted LPs*	*Scope & Seq*	*Write own LPs*
1st Year	15	20	10
2nd Year	28	24	17
3rd Year	6	6	4
4+ Years	15	2	8
Total	64	52	39

x^2(6) = 10.063, p = .122

	Race & LP Approach		
Race	*Scripted LPs*	*Scope & Seq*	*Write own LPs*
Alternate[1]	2	2	0
Asian	6	9	6
Black	24	12	8
Hispanic	11	11	8
White	21	18	17

x^2 = 5.754, p = .451

	Gender & LP Approach		
	Scripted LPs	*Scope & Seq*	*Write own LPs*
Female	44	40	22
Male	20	11	17
Other[1]	0	1	0

x^2 (2) = 4.973, p = .083

[a]Not included in chi-square tes.

in CMOs (39/55), though not all elementary teachers at CMOs used SLPs. Nine elementary teachers at CMOs created their own lessons based on a scope and sequence, and two wrote their own lesson plans —a gym teacher and a 4th grade ELA teacher. Twenty-four middle school teachers received SLPs, and only eight (out of 43) high school teachers received SLPs, all at CMOs.

Most high school teachers wrote their own lesson plans (23/43); five of these worked at CMOs, five at independent charters, and thirteen at district school. Many taught non-core subjects such as creative writing or neuroscience. Some taught upper-level maths classes like pre-calculus, or state mandated courses such as Government that didn't have an accompanying standardized test. Twelve wrote their own lessons based on a given scope and sequence. Some of these teachers taught Advanced Placement courses with a mandated curriculum created by the College Board, though no individual lesson plans. Some taught courses that terminated in a standardized state assessment, such as algebra or earth science.

Our sample had 106 female, 48 male, and one non-binary teacher. Male and female teachers were distributed across school type (CMO, District, and independent charter school) and school level (elementary, middle, high school). When looking at lesson planning approaches, 44 of the 106 female teachers used SLPs, as did 20 of the 48 male teachers. A chi square test for independence showed that the relationship between gender and the use of SLPs was not statistically significant. However, there was a significant relationship between gender and school level ($X^2(2) = 7.581$, $p = 0.023$). Female teachers were overrepresented in elementary schools and underrepresented at the high school level. Thus, the fact that female teachers in our sample were more likely to receive SLPs appears to be more a result of their overrepresentation at the elementary level rather than their employment in CMOs or their gender.

In summary, teachers at CMOs were more likely to receive SLPs, as were teachers at the elementary level. Teachers in high school were more likely to write their own lesson plans, and only 18.8% of high school teachers in our sample received SLPs. Gender was not a statistically significant factor in lesson planning approach.

We next wanted to analyse the relationship between reports of autonomy in response to questions 12 through 15 of our survey (Table 3) and different factors. Teachers at CMOs were more likely to report lower autonomy in choosing their lesson goals and objectives (question 12), materials (question 14), and content and skills (question 15). District teachers, by contrast, were more likely to express greater autonomy on these items, and teachers at independent charters showed a more even distribution. Still, there were some teachers at CMOs who reported high autonomy, and likewise there were some district teachers who reported low autonomy.

Similarly, we found teachers who received SLPs report lower autonomy on these same items. Once again, there were some teachers who received SLPs who reported high autonomy, and select teachers who wrote their own lesson plans who reported low autonomy. More interestingly, there were large numbers of teachers across all lesson planning approaches who responded 'somewhat false' or 'somewhat true' to questions 12, 14, and 15 (72, 76, and 85 responses, respectively). This could reflect different interpretations of what it means to write one's own lesson plan, or the different ways that SLPs are used in a school.

Finally, there was a similar trend with school level where elementary teachers reported lower autonomy, and teachers at high schools reported higher autonomy. There appeared to be no difference between the responses of elementary and middle school teachers. A chi-square test for independence on question 12 comparing only middle and elementary school teachers failed to reject the null hypothesis that the two factors are independent ($X^2 (3) = 1.555$, $p = 0.670$). We found no statistically significant relationship between autonomy responses and gender or race.

One interesting difference in these overall trends was found in response to question 13, 'What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself' (Table 3). This is the most general of the autonomy questions. Here, we found a significant relationship between responses to question 13 and both lesson planning approaches and school level. However, the relationship between responses to this question and school type was not statistically significant ($X^2 (6) = 9.935$, $p = 0.127$). One possible

Table 3. Responses to questions 12, 13, 14, and 15, by school type, lesson planning approach, and school level.

Characteristic	12. My teaching focuses on goals and objectives I select myself.				13. What I teach in my class is determined … by myself.				14. The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by me.				15. The content and skills taught in my class are those I select			
School Type	False	Somewhat False	Somewhat True	True	False	Somewhat False	Somewhat True	True	False	Somewhat False	Somewhat True	True	False	Somewhat False	Somewhat True	True
CMO	37	19	14	9	34	19	17	9	28	20	20	11	35	26	12	6
District	8	8	14	18	9	11	18	10	7	5	17	19	8	12	18	10
Independent	5	8	9	6	9	6	8	5	7	5	9	7	6	10	7	5
Total	50	35	37	33	52	36	43	24	42	30	46	37	49	48	37	21
LP Approach	x^2 (6) = 24.063, p = .000				x^2 (6) = 9.935, p = 0.127				x^2 (6) = 17.644, p = .007				x^2 (6) = 19.762, p = .003			
SLP	35	13	12	5	34	15	12	4	31	13	16	5	35	19	9	2
Scope & Seq.	15	18	10	8	15	18	16	2	9	17	18	7	13	23	13	2
Write your Own	0	4	15	20	3	3	15	18	2	0	12	25	1	6	15	17
Total	50	35	37	33	52	36	43	24	42	30	46	37	49	48	37	21
School Level	x^2 (6) = 24.063, p = .000				x^2 (6) = 57.726, p = .000				x^2 (6) = 68.402, p = .000				x^2 (6) = 68.587, p = .000			
Elementary	23	14	8	9	27	12	12	3	18	11	21	4	24	17	12	1
Middle	22	13	14	9	18	15	17	8	19	14	12	13	19	20	11	8
High	5	8	15	15	7	9	14	13	5	5	13	20	6	11	14	12
Total	50	35	37	33	52	36	43	24	42	30	46	37	49	48	37	21
	x^2 (6) = 17.833, p = .007				x^2 (6) = 19.172, p = 0.004				x^2 (6) = 24.843, p = .000				x^2 (6) = 21.721, p = .001			

interpretation of this is that teachers at CMO are describing reports of objectively low autonomy when they describe their control over lessons goals and objectives, materials, and content and skills (questions 12, 14, and 15). However, when considering the more subjective and general question 13, they judge their autonomy to be higher despite the specific conditions of their context. Even analysing the relationship of lesson planning approaches to question 13 calls for nuance. There were a handful who received SLPs and felt they determined what they taught, and some who wrote their own lessons and felt they had little control over what was taught. This raises the question of what, beyond the actual lesson planning approach, influences autonomy perceptions. Of the teachers who wrote their own lessons and responded false, one taught an AP course, one was a maths teacher, and one was a special education teacher. Of the four teachers who received SLPs and responded true, there was one each at elementary and high school, and two middle school teachers. They taught English, Biology, Science and History, respectively. Perhaps more interesting, more teachers responded with the two moderate responses, 'somewhat false' or 'somewhat true' (79/155), than either of the extreme responses 'true' or 'false'.

Taken together, these results suggest first that lesson planning approaches are related to perceptions of autonomy, with teachers who receive SLPs perceiving less autonomy than those who receive a scope and sequence or write their own lesson. Secondly, school level is related to perceptions of autonomy; elementary and middle school teachers both perceive less autonomy than high school teachers, and there appears to be no statistical differences between elementary and middle school teachers' perception of autonomy. Third, school type is related to perceptions of autonomy, with teachers at CMOs perceiving less autonomy than teachers at independent charter schools and district schools. There appears to be no statistical difference between teachers at independent charter schools and district schools. Finally, while female and black teachers represented large proportions of those who used SLPs and worked in CMOs, there was not a statistical relationship between perceptions of lesson autonomy and gender or race.

The ambiguity of autonomy perceptions is illustrated by looking at the responses of a subset of middle school teachers to question 13. This group included a mix of lesson plan approaches, school types, and years of experience (Table 4). There was also a range of subjects taught. Of the eight middle school teachers who chose 'true', six wrote their own lesson plans and they were from a mix of school types. The two teachers who received an SLP in this group were a 7th grade history teacher at a CMO and a 6th/7th grade teacher at a district school. Of the eighteen middle school teachers who chose false, ten received SLPs and eight received a scope and sequence. Again, a range of subjects, school types, and experience levels were represented in this group.

Thus, there was a significant relationship between perceptions of autonomy and both school level and lesson planning approaches. Teachers who worked in elementary school and who received SLPs were more likely to express low perceptions of autonomy, while teachers who worked in high school or wrote their own lesson plans were more likely to express high perceptions of autonomy. However,

Table 4. Middle school teachers' response to question 13 ('what I teach . . . ').

False	Somewhat False	Somewhat True	True
18	15	17	8
School Type			
CMO	District	Ind. Charter	
24	22	12	
Lesson Planning Approach			
SLP	Scope & Seq	Write Own	
23	24	11	
Yrs of Experience			
1 year	2 years	3rd year	4+ Years
21	24	5	8

there was a large group of teachers who experienced nuanced perceptions of autonomy, as evidenced by the many teachers who chose moderate responses to the autonomy questions. Furthermore, there were teachers who wrote lesson plans and expressed little autonomy and teachers who received SLPs and expressed higher autonomy. Interestingly, teachers who received SLPs represented the largest subset of both black and female teachers, however neither race or gender were significantly related to autonomy in our sample.

This analysis has some important limitations. Some categories had less than five respondents, which undermines the validity of some of the analysis. Additionally, the relationship of causality between perceptions of autonomy and the different factors (school level, school type, and lesson plan approach) remains unclear. For example, it is difficult to say if people report different perceptions of autonomy because of the grade level, the type of school they work in, or approach to lesson planning. Thus, it is worth exploring the qualitative data to gain further insight into how autonomy around lesson planning is experienced.

Qualitative findings

We interviewed 17 teachers from our initial sample to gain deeper insight into survey responses. They were selected across a range of school types, school levels, and lesson planning approaches (Table 5). Three broad themes emerged from these interviews: lesson planning took a variety of forms, teachers experienced support in different ways, and autonomy was often paradoxically related to the structure of lesson planning.

Diverse lesson planning approaches

Participants described a variety of different approaches to planning. For some, the process was highly regulated. Tima, a 3rd grade teacher at a CMO, described how she planned: ' . . . my network provides the curriculum, and so I'm able to just go on the document, download the lesson . . . I'll either print it or annotate around it'. Derek, a 1st grade teacher at an independent charter school described a similar process. His school used a program called Lavinia, and he would download certain lesson plans from the company's website. However, he had some discretion to make changes:

Table 5. Interview participants.

Name	Subject/Grade	School Type	Yrs teaching	Lesson Planning Approach	Submits LP?	Autonomy Score
Liliana	12th Gov't	Ind. Charter	1	Writes own	Yes	8
Esther	MS Math/SpED	CMO	2	SLP	Yes	6 to 8
Rafael	10th Neuroscience	District	2	Writes own	No	10
Romilda	HS Science	District	2	Writes own	No	7
Vince	10th English	Ind. Charter	2	Writes Own	No	9.5
Erica	8th Math	CMO	3	Writes Own	No	7 to 8
Flo	5th Science	CMO	3	SLP	Yes	6 or 7
Rita	HS SpED	District	1	Writes Own	No	3 to 4
Jessica	5th Gr SS	District	1	Writes Own	No	1 to 5
Hermione	MS Science	District	2	S&S	No	10
Derek	1st Writing	Ind Charter	2	SLP	Yes	5 or 6
Isaac	10th Earth Science	District	2	S&S	No	8
Kierra	3rd Grade	CMO	2	SLP	No	5 or 6
Michelle	High School SpED	District	2	Writes Own	No	9
John	MS History	CMO	3	S&S	Yes	I don't know
Deanna	6th ELA	CMO	4	SLP	Yes	7 or 8
Tima	3rd Grade	CMO	5	SLP	Yes	4

> They have all of the lessons listed, so I go to the writing portion, and I just take out and add anything I want. So, this lesson, they give you the whole script and everything, [but] I didn't like any of it, so I changed it all, and I just put the teacher blurb, when to call on students … everything is broken down.

Although Derek is describing changes he makes, he still follows a detailed template. Furthermore, he has to write out what he plans to say and turn his plan in to a supervisor. He is expected to then 'internalize' the lesson, a term meaning to deeply learn the main points and flow of a lesson so that his lesson will be executed as planned:

> You're supposed to internalize it by the time you come back to school that Monday … They don't mind if you have the paper in front of you, they just don't want you reading directly off a script, it just doesn't look good.

Some teachers are given many resources to support their planning. John, a middle school history teacher at a CMO, receives a detailed unit plan with learning objectives, supplementary texts that he should use, and a pacing calendar. In describing how he modifies the learning resources given to him he said, 'I don't really look at the standards, and I don't really look at the purpose cause I kind of understand that intuitively'. He is aware of the pacing calendar and makes sure that he adheres to it:

> They'll just give us the unit, one unit at a time, and they kind of just estimate how far people are pacing and then they'll drop the next unit before you're done. I'm either cutting stuff or I'm taking a one-day lesson stretching out to two days.

The only feedback on lesson planning was being told 'you're not behind'. With the discretion he is given, he can choose from among the resources given to him, dwell on a topic, or resort to 'cutting stuff'. 'So, I have a good amount of autonomy', he said, describing his experience of this flexibility.

Isaac, a high school science teacher at a district school, described how he used his content knowledge, familiarity with the standards, and his knowledge of the state exam, to plan his lessons:

> A lot of times when I start planning a lesson, I'll immediately look at the standard, the NGSS standards, I look at what's required … what are some of the performance expectations, as well as the New York State specific standards . . . like what needs to be covered. And then I also look at [state test] questions that the students have to answer by the end of the year . . .

> And so, after looking at those things, I'll often look for either a short sort of introductory video or an image, or just some sort of small hook that relates to the … So, for example, we were talking about the water cycle today and there's a big accident happening in Ohio with a train being derailed and chemicals leaking into the water supply, and so I use that as a bit of an introduction.

There are several supports for planning at Isaac's school. He receives a scope and sequence, there are interim assessments every several weeks, and he checks in periodically with an assistant principal. Still, he writes his lesson plans mostly from scratch and he has to create his daily plan from his own resourcefulness.

To summarize this finding, receiving SLPs, getting resources to be modified, or writing one's own lessons were three broad approaches to planning. Though there was variation within each approach, there was also a range of experiences from highly regulated to more freedom. Teachers like Derek may have used SLPs but still had some discretion, and teachers like Isaac wrote their own lessons but worked within rigid guidelines of state tests and administrative check-ins.

Organisational structures for planning

Though our participants engaged with lesson planning through many organizational structures, these were not experienced in uniform ways. Instead, similar structures could result in very different perceptions of autonomy. Esther was a 2nd year high school special education teacher at a CMO who was responsible for pulling students for targeted lessons. 'We usually know what we're teaching two weeks ahead', she said, explaining the arrangement for receiving SLPs, 'it's kind of helpful, because that way we know where we're going'.

Erica was an eighth-grade maths teacher at a CMO and she experienced lesson planning as both supportive and challenging. Every week she would download the week's lesson from her CMO's shared online drive, then make any modifications. She had an informal arrangement with her Assistant Principal to share her final lesson plans by Sunday in a shared online spreadsheet. There was a row where her Assistant Principal would then leave comments, and this was feedback that Erica found very helpful. She was the only eighth grade maths teacher at her school, and she valued the collaboration and insight from her supervisor. However, the spreadsheet was actually part of a more formal management arrangement created by administrators at the CMO central office, and this arrangement was frustrating:

> . . . the bigger thing is that [lessons are] due to our central office on Wednesdays. So that's like the real actual deadline of when, I guess, sometimes people from central office are checking the lesson plans. It's not clear to me that that's ever consistently happening . . . it felt like they were just making it busy work for us, and also condescending to us as if these weren't things that we were thinking about, and they needed written evidence of it for every single lesson plan every day.

For Erica, this structure was experienced as supportive through the informal understanding she had with her Assistant Principal, largely because they interacted and used it for her teaching. The same structure was 'condescending' when managed by people at the central office with little discussion.

Meanwhile, Hermione was a middle school science teacher at a district school and there were few guidelines for her planning. In her first year teaching, she thought she had to closely follow a curriculum that her school had purchased:

> . . . initially, I didn't necessarily know what the expectations were . . . I heard teachers say, like, 'Oh, you're given a curriculum, and then [the administration is] really strict, you need to be teaching it exactly'. And so that's what I was doing. And then my supervisor was like, 'What are you doing?' Why are you doing that? It's not gonna work for our kids'.

After realizing that she had the freedom to make her own lessons, Hermione was struggling and recognized that she could benefit from extra support. There was a Special Education supervisor who she could meet periodically, but there were no department meetings or regular check-ins with administrators. Now, in her second year she was much more comfortable and she no longer relied on others. She prepared her lessons with little oversight, and this changed her opinion of lesson plans:

> To me a lesson plan seems very pointless, because the base of it for me is just: what activities are we gonna be doing? The scripting of it, the back pocket questions . . . it all happens, but it's at very different points in the lessons for different classes. . . . so I just always see it as one of those things that I just do so that my administrators don't write me up.

Lesson planning was something Hermione did to avoid confrontation with her administration. Initially she perceived her curriculum as a mandate, then without oversight she was unsure what to teach. Now, she was confident in her instruction and had clearly staked out lesson planning as her domain. She participated in the structures of accountability only as an act of compliance.

Liliana was a high school government teacher in her first year at an independent charter school. There was little oversight of her lesson planning; the only thing her supervisors had insisted on was that she create new lessons rather than reusing ones from previous years. She had planned with a co-teacher for some time, but found that more difficult as the year went on. There was a part-time coach whose support Liliana found incredibly helpful, but the visits were too infrequent to be useful for all of her lessons. 'I feel like I spend a really long time on each lesson plan', she said, 'And that's been hard to do because I just don't have enough time in the day and I'm obviously not being paid for all that'. The work of lesson planning was overwhelming for Liliana, and her raising the issue of compensation suggests that she views it as a challenging extra responsibility that deserves to be valued.

These examples show that organizational structures, including SLPs, can be supportive for teachers in preparing for lessons. John, for example, found the resources and required pacing guides as supportive of autonomy. For teachers who had to submit lessons, the feedback they received

could be helpful or appear as micromanagement. Finally, teachers who wrote their own lessons with little oversight could enjoy the discretion granted to them, but they could also feel overwhelmed and isolated.

Experiencing autonomy through lesson planning

During the interview, we didn't explicitly ask about autonomy or define it. Similarly, survey responses to the earlier items were given with little context. Our final interview question asked participants to rate their autonomy on a scale from 1 (least) to 10 (most). When we asked this question, we first defined autonomy as the 'extent to which you select learning goals, have control over this process, over your materials, and over what you ultimately teach in your class'. In participant responses, we found an often paradoxical relationship between the structures that existed and perceptions of autonomy.

Tima rated herself a 4. She felt empowered to change minor lesson items like the hook or perhaps a video that was shown, but she acknowledged that she couldn't change most aspects of the lessons. Her survey responses, however, were more varied. She answered 'somewhat true' to items thirteen and fourteen about her general influence on teaching and on the choice of materials. Tima's self-rating was one of the lowest of all interviewees; she received SLPs and was heavily monitored.

Esther received SLPs and at first rated herself a 6, then revised it up to an 8 as she felt very comfortable with her content. However, Rita and Jessica, both district teachers who wrote their own lesson plans, rated their autonomy as below 5. Isaac created his own lessons but was both following a scope and sequence and preparing for a well-defined state exam; his self-rating was an 8. Derek literally downloaded his lessons from a company's online curriculum, yet still rated himself a '5 or 6' after thinking through some of the changes he had made. 'They give us the materials, basically', he explained. 'But if we all have a problem with it then we can just . . . .try to alter the lesson plan in a way that makes sense for us'.

Hermione rated herself a 10. She created her own lessons and considered the work to be hers alone. 'The first couple of months of my teaching was like understanding the amount of autonomy that I had', she said in explaining her path from believing she had to follow the school's purchased curriculum to taking out lesson planning as fully her responsibility. Liliana was in a similar situation and also rated her autonomy highly at an 8. Perhaps in her second year of teaching that self-assessment will rise further.

SLPs and organizational structures for feedback and oversight both failed to have a clear relationship to perceptions of autonomy in our interviews. Even teachers who described great latitude in planning didn't always experience full autonomy. Overall, participants in our survey who wrote their lessons had higher autonomy ratings, but when asked to explicitly consider their autonomy, our participants revealed the construct to be more complicated. John's case perhaps best captures this intricacy. Without prompting, he expressed feeling great autonomy even as he described several guidelines around pacing, the use of resources, and content that he had to follow. When asked to rate his autonomy, he responded by saying 'Well, I, like . . . honestly, I don't know'.

Discussion: autonomy in the spaces and the changing role of teachers

Our study lends insight into the complexity of perceptions of autonomy. Different school contexts, lesson planning approaches, and personal characteristics all influence such perceptions, and our study goes further by highlighting the role of specific interpersonal and organizational details. More fundamentally, the findings complicate simplistic judgements about the merits of SLPs and CMOs for autonomy. The trends from our survey, combined with the qualitative interviews, point to the importance of trusting relationships between teachers and administrators in supporting autonomy. They show how teachers could find spaces of autonomy even as their work was increasingly

controlled. When considering these findings within the larger context, they also hint at the changing nature of the role of teachers.

Two factors that emerged as important in influencing perceptions of autonomy were the school level at which a teacher worked and their approach to lesson planning. Teachers working in elementary schools were more likely to use SLPs and to feel lower autonomy. Employment at CMOs had an uneven relationship with perceptions of autonomy; it was found to be statistically significant with autonomy questions dealing with the specifics of selecting learning goals, materials, skills, but was not found to be significant factor in an item about a more general sense of autonomy. This might be because teachers at district and independent charter schools, while less reliant on school-written lesson plans, were still aware of concrete guidelines for their planning. Using a given scope and sequence or a purchased curriculum could have the same impact on perceptions of autonomy as SLPs.

Our analysis of the qualitative data provides nuance to the survey findings. For example, a prominent trend was that high school teachers expressed higher levels of autonomy. SLPs may become less necessary as state exams and national curricula like Advanced Placement provide structure. High school teachers may also have stronger content knowledge that supports more confidence in making planning decisions. Liliana, Isaac, and John, for example, all described nuanced approaches to planning that drew upon their own knowledge of their subject. This observation might reflect differences between input regulation—the strict control of the actual work of teachers through structures such as SLPs—and output monitoring—the subtle steering of teachers' work through accountability measures such as state tests (Biesta, 2004; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). Isaac's case is an example of how both school and larger state policies determine much of what he teaches; though he perceived autonomy in the specifics of his work, much of his teaching was actually subject to decisions made by others.

Our qualitative findings also show that SLPs cannot be described as uniformly good or bad for teacher autonomy. Some teachers found the experience of using SLPs to be prescriptive and limiting. Others who received SLPs found them to be supportive in their work and understood their role as having to make pedagogical choices in the moment rather than deciding the substance of instruction. Conversely, while writing one's own lesson plans was related to a higher sense of autonomy, this was not always beneficial. Liliana wrote lesson plans with few resources to draw upon, and she found the experience isolating and stressful. As John, who received extensive materials, commented, 'Oh, my God! I mean it would be so much worse if I had to make every single lesson plan'.

Clearly there is a role for lesson supports, perhaps even SLPs, for newer teachers like Liliana, Hermione, or Isaac, in streamlining their planning amongst the challenges of being new to the profession. This type of training can help develop teachers' curricular reasoning (McDuffie & Mather, 2009). Development and support around lesson planning can benefit teachers of all experience levels; Taylor (2013) describes a training programme that fostered nuanced approaches to lesson planning and supported a shift from a 'teacher-proof curriculum' to 'curriculum-proof teachers'.

Our qualitative interviews showed the importance of trust and support at an interpersonal level. All schools had created organizational structures around lesson planning, whether SLPs, frequent check-ins, expectations for lesson plan submission, or access to resources. Any of these had the potential to be perceived as supportive by teachers; they could be stabilizing guidance for newer teachers or valuable resources for overworked teachers. However, these same structures could feel overly prescriptive—a form of micromanagement—when they were perceived as strictly evaluative. Erica's description of feeling both support and condescension from the same management arrangement highlights how different organizational relationships lead to different degrees of trust.

Even when much of a teacher's work was strictly controlled, teachers latched onto pockets of discretion as symbols of their autonomy. Esther, Derek, and Tima trusted their school to the degree that they knew their voice would be heard in minor changes, and in exchange they accepted larger control of their work. All perceived they had some degree of autonomy even as they had very little ability to make meaningful changes to their curricula. These teachers, all working at CMOs, were

acutely aware of being evaluated by their supervisors on the fidelity of their lessons. More importantly, they were reliant on their schools for their plans.

This different type of relationship between teachers and their work came at a cost. Tima highlighted this fact when she explained her ambivalence about having to download lesson scripts, internalize them, and review them with her supervisor. 'Sometimes I feel like I don't need to do it, because I just can look at an objective and know what I'm teaching now', she said, drawing on her five years of experience in teaching. However, her administrators would occasionally change an upcoming lesson and throw off her own planning. 'As long as I can do it [internalize lessons] during my work hours, I'm okay. But if I find myself doing it after school, or on the weekend, I am *infuriated*. Like, pissed'.

Beyond their relation to teacher autonomy, Tima's quote suggests that SLPs have changed understandings of the nature of a teacher's job. Isaac experienced great autonomy and demonstrated deep thinking in his planning; yet his work was heavily guided by state standards and a school assessment calendar. Derek and Esther both felt relatively high autonomy though they worked exclusively with SLPs. Tima, who reported the lowest autonomy of our interviewees, translated this into creating clearly defined boundaries between her and her school's responsibilities. She had seized the small areas of autonomy granted to her; but she had also relinquished control over many areas traditionally associated with teachers' work: choosing lesson topics and goals, selecting materials, designing assessments, creating interventions to respond to student work. When she is asked to extend efforts beyond this new limited definition of her job, she is 'infuriated'. Even Liliana, a teacher who wrote her own lesson plans, had come to understand the tremendous work of designing lessons and saw it as an effort for which she deserved compensation. These reflections show teachers embracing small spaces of autonomy as symbols of their authority, even though their work remains defined by official guidelines.

The role of teachers has been described as undergoing a period of de-professionalization as a result of the use of standardized lesson materials (Golann, 2021; Milner, 2013; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017). As our study confirms, the control of lesson planning is not restricted to CMOs. Many teachers are implementing materials designed elsewhere with one result being an increasingly uniform classroom experience. Such materials are perhaps essential in conditions of high turnover where schools have to initiate many new teachers every year. With a revolving workforce, the most vital characteristics of new teachers might be their malleability and willingness to follow a prescribed model rather than their content knowledge or instructional skill (Golann, 2021). In such a context, the structure around the role of a teacher can work against developing a sense of purpose. For example, for both Liliana and Tima their purpose for teaching seemed more transactional rather than driven by greater purpose of serving students (Dresser, 2012).

In CMOs, district schools, and independent charters, then, the very essence of the work of being a teacher seems to be undergoing changes with more decisions being made by official state, district, CMO, or school mandates. Teachers like Hermione described greater freedom in their planning; but these cases were mostly restricted to high school district teachers. Valli and Buese (2007) described an intensification of the role of the teacher, with more instructional regulation, added responsibilities to meet accountability mandates, and less time for relational work with students. Our study adds a dimension to those findings by showing how institutional norms around lesson planning have created a new collection of teacher actions from downloading materials, making sense of the plans of others, submitting to regular supervision of plans, and internalizing scripts. Even in this context, teachers still find spaces of autonomy in features such as scripts, pacing guides, and frequent assessments, their perceptions masking increasingly rigid management structures in schools.

Limitations

An important limitation of our study was the composition of our sample. Though our sample included teachers in different contexts, the sample itself was not representative of teachers in

general or teachers at district, CMOs, or independent charter schools. Additionally, most of our teachers were within their first three years of teaching (130/155 participants); the reflections and findings on autonomy would no doubt be different for more experienced teachers. It would be interesting to investigate the degree to which more experienced teachers use SLPs, re-use previous lesson plans, or genuinely modify their lessons for their current students. A second limitation of our sample was the imperfect measurement of autonomy. Measures of teacher autonomy in general are highly subjective, and we only collected data on one dimension of this concept. Our qualitative interviews showed that participants interpreted the autonomy survey items in very different ways. We sought to frame the survey for participants by providing clear definitions, but teachers still may have had varied interpretations of these items. More items may have provided more robust data, and it may have been beneficial to pair autonomy items with other variables.

Several interesting questions remain. One concerns the relevance of race and gender in perceptions of autonomy. We found both to not be statistically related to lesson planning approaches or perceptions of autonomy, however it is difficult to avoid the observation that a large proportion of teachers who worked in elementary school and who received SLPs were Black. This held true, though less so, for female teachers. Anecdotally, this seems important; for example, Tima, Derek, and Esther were all teachers of colour who worked in CMOs, and Tima and Derek both worked in elementary schools. A relevant area of research can be explorations of black and female institutional experiences of teaching, including autonomy.

Another area that merits further research is the importance of teacher autonomy. Its relationship to factors such as teacher satisfaction, effectiveness, cultural responsiveness, and retention, warrant further exploration. Understanding these relationships could contribute to new avenues for supporting teacher autonomy.

Lastly, our study hints at the challenges of the lesson planning process. Schools and school leaders have considerable influence in creating cultures that can support teachers, especially new teachers, with effective planning that both fosters autonomy and skill. Further research can explore the nature of cultivating trusting supervisory and coaching relationships, and the role of content knowledge in instructional planning.

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