

NEGOTIATING AUTONOMY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' WORK AUTONOMY IN CHINESE PUBLIC KINDERGARTENS

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Abstract: Teacher work autonomy is widely recognized as a key foundation for teachers' professional development and high-quality education and has become an important topic in early childhood education research. However, previous studies have predominantly adopted quantitative approaches, focusing on the antecedents and outcomes of teacher work autonomy while paying limited attention to teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making in everyday educational practice. To address this gap, this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how teachers experience work autonomy under kindergarten principals' leadership. Sixteen teachers from public kindergartens in China participated in the study. Data were collected through open-ended written responses and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that teacher work autonomy is not a fixed professional right but a dynamic experience continuously shaped, negotiated, and reconstructed through interactions among organizational policies, principal leadership, and educational practice. Although teachers perceived a certain degree of professional discretion, they also encountered multiple constraints arising from organizational management, institutional regulations, and administrative requirements. In response, they continuously adapted, negotiated, and adjusted their professional practices. By revealing the complexity of teachers' autonomy experiences, this study offers a new perspective on understanding teacher professional development in Chinese public kindergartens and provides practical implications for leadership practices and organizational environments that support teachers' professional autonomy.

Keywords: Teacher work autonomy; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); Public kindergarten teachers; Principal leadership; Professional development; China

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Teacher work autonomy has long been regarded as a fundamental component of teacher professionalism and an essential condition for improving educational quality, promoting instructional innovation, and supporting sustainable professional development. In early childhood education, where teaching requires continuous pedagogical judgment, responsiveness to children's diverse needs, and close collaboration with families and colleagues, teachers' ability to exercise professional discretion is particularly important. Autonomy enables teachers to make informed decisions about curriculum implementation, classroom management, assessment, and interactions with children, thereby fostering more responsive and developmentally appropriate educational practices [1-3].

Despite its recognized importance, teacher work autonomy has become increasingly complex within contemporary educational systems. Across many countries, accountability policies, curriculum standardization, performance evaluation, and administrative regulations have reshaped teachers' professional work, often narrowing the scope of independent decision-making. Rather than functioning as completely autonomous professionals, teachers frequently negotiate their professional judgments within organizational structures and institutional expectations. Consequently, teacher work autonomy is increasingly understood as a context-dependent and relational phenomenon shaped by organizational culture, leadership, accountability systems, and policy environments [4-6].

These tensions are particularly evident in the context of Chinese public kindergartens. As public educational institutions, kindergartens operate within a highly structured administrative system that emphasizes policy implementation, organizational accountability, and standardized management. At the same time, recent educational reforms have increasingly encouraged teacher professionalism, reflective practice, and curriculum innovation. Consequently, kindergarten teachers are expected to balance institutional requirements with professional judgment in their daily work. Understanding how teachers experience and interpret work autonomy within this dynamic context is therefore essential for advancing both teacher professional development and the quality of early childhood education.

1.2 Literature Review

Teacher work autonomy has been conceptualized in different ways across educational research, reflecting diverse

understandings of teachers' professional roles. Early studies primarily viewed autonomy as teachers' freedom from external control and their authority to make independent instructional decisions. More recent scholarship argues that autonomy extends beyond individual discretion and should be understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing professional judgment, responsibility, agency, and organizational participation [7,8]. Rather than representing unrestricted independence, teacher work autonomy is increasingly recognized as a relational and contextually situated process through which teachers exercise professional decision-making while responding to organizational expectations and policy demands.

Existing research has examined teacher work autonomy from several perspectives. A substantial body of quantitative studies has investigated the factors that influence teachers' perceived autonomy, including school leadership, organizational climate, trust, collegial relationships, accountability systems, and educational policies. These studies consistently demonstrate that supportive leadership, collaborative professional cultures, and mutual trust contribute positively to teachers' perceptions of autonomy, whereas excessive administrative control and rigid accountability mechanisms tend to reduce teachers' professional discretion. At the same time, teacher autonomy has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, such as stronger professional identity, higher job satisfaction, greater work engagement, enhanced instructional innovation, and improved teacher retention. These findings highlight the significant role of autonomy in fostering teacher well-being and professional effectiveness [9,10].

Within the field of early childhood education, research has increasingly acknowledged the distinctive characteristics of kindergarten teaching. Unlike teachers in compulsory education, kindergarten teachers make numerous spontaneous pedagogical decisions throughout the day in response to children's interests, developmental needs, and emerging learning opportunities. Consequently, teacher autonomy in early childhood settings is often enacted through everyday interactions rather than formal instructional planning alone. Recent studies have also emphasized the importance of principal leadership in shaping teachers' professional experiences by influencing organizational culture, decision-making opportunities, and teachers' sense of professional trust. These findings suggest that teacher autonomy is closely intertwined with leadership practices, professional trust, and organizational relationships [11,12].

Although the existing literature has generated valuable insights, several limitations remain. Most studies have relied on survey methods and quantitative analyses, focusing primarily on the antecedents and outcomes of teacher work autonomy. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how teachers themselves experience, interpret, and negotiate autonomy in their everyday professional practice. This limitation is particularly evident in studies conducted within Chinese public kindergartens, where teachers operate under highly structured administrative systems while simultaneously being expected to demonstrate professional initiative and curriculum innovation. As a result, the lived meanings and dynamic processes through which teacher work autonomy is experienced remain insufficiently understood.

1.3 Research Gap

Although previous research has substantially advanced understanding of teacher work autonomy, important gaps remain. First, the dominance of quantitative approaches has provided valuable evidence regarding the antecedents and consequences of autonomy but has offered limited insight into how teachers actually experience and make sense of autonomy in their everyday professional lives. As autonomy is inherently shaped by personal interpretations and contextual interactions, survey data alone cannot fully capture the meanings teachers attach to their professional decision-making or the ways they respond to competing institutional expectations.

Second, much of the existing literature conceptualizes autonomy as an individual or organizational attribute that can be measured through predefined dimensions. Such an approach tends to overlook the dynamic and evolving nature of autonomy as teachers interact with principals, colleagues, parents, and institutional policies in daily practice. In highly centralized educational systems such as China, teachers' professional autonomy is not simply granted or restricted but is continuously negotiated within specific organizational contexts.

To address these limitations, a qualitative approach that prioritizes teachers' lived experiences and contextual meaning-making is needed [13]. IPA provides an appropriate methodological framework because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and construct meaning from significant experiences while acknowledging the influence of social and organizational contexts [13,14].

1.4 Research Purpose and Research Questions

Drawing on IPA, this study explores the lived experiences of teacher work autonomy among teachers in Chinese public kindergartens. Specifically, it examines how teachers experience work autonomy under principals' leadership, how they interpret the opportunities and constraints encountered in their daily work, and how they negotiate professional agency within organizational settings. Rather than treating autonomy as a fixed characteristic, this study conceptualizes it as a dynamic and context-dependent process that emerges through interactions among institutional structures, leadership practices, and educational practices.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do public kindergarten teachers experience work autonomy in their daily professional practice?
2. How do teachers interpret and negotiate opportunities and constraints related to work autonomy under principals' leadership?

3. How do these experiences shape teachers' professional agency and everyday educational practice?

2 METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted an IPA approach to explore how teachers in Chinese public kindergartens experience and make sense of their work autonomy under principals' leadership. IPA is particularly suitable for exploring how individuals interpret personally significant experiences in their everyday lives [14]. IPA was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the meanings teachers attached to their everyday professional experiences rather than to measure predefined dimensions of autonomy [14]. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study views teacher work autonomy as a contextually situated and relational experience that is continuously shaped through interactions between teachers, principals, and institutional structures. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth examination of how teachers interpreted opportunities and constraints in their daily work and how they negotiated professional agency within the organizational context of public kindergartens [13].

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which is widely used in IPA to select individuals who can provide rich accounts of a shared lived experience [14]. Sixteen teachers from six public kindergartens in western China participated in the study. All participants were currently employed as full-time kindergarten teachers, had at least three years of teaching experience, and were directly involved in classroom teaching and regular interactions with their principals. Teachers in probationary positions were excluded to ensure that participants had sufficient professional experience to reflect on issues of work autonomy. The sample size was consistent with the idiographic focus of IPA, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical representativeness and supports detailed exploration of participants' meaning-making within a specific organizational context [14].

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected between [Month] and [Month, Year] using multiple qualitative sources. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a brief written reflection task designed to help them recall and organize personally meaningful experiences related to work autonomy. Rather than serving as an independent source of data, these written reflections functioned as a preparatory activity that facilitated deeper reflection during the interviews.

The primary data source consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with the 16 participating teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face in a quiet setting or through a private online voice call, depending on the participant's preference. This duration is commonly recommended for obtaining rich experiential accounts in qualitative interviewing [15]. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide explored teachers' understandings of work autonomy, their everyday experiences of professional decision-making, the influence of principals' leadership, and the ways they responded to tensions between professional judgment and institutional expectations. Semi-structured interviewing provides the flexibility needed to explore participants' lived experiences while allowing the researcher to probe emerging meanings [16].

To enhance contextual understanding, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 8 kindergarten principals. These interviews were not included in the primary phenomenological analysis but served as contextual data to provide organizational perspectives on leadership practices and to support the interpretation of teachers' lived experiences of work autonomy.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the procedures of IPA as outlined by Smith et al. [14,17]. Analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript to develop familiarity with participants' narratives. Exploratory notes were made to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations, which were then developed into emergent themes representing participants' interpretations of their experiences. Each case was analyzed individually before patterns were examined across cases to identify shared meanings as well as important variations. Related themes were subsequently organized into superordinate themes that reflected teachers' experiences of work autonomy within their organizational contexts. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and to consider the researcher's influence on meaning-making. MAXQDA was used to facilitate data management and coding; however, all coding, theme development, and interpretation were conducted manually by the researcher.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, reflexive journaling, and triangulation of teacher interviews and principal interviews [18,19]. Emerging interpretations were clarified with participants during the interviews to ensure that their intended meanings were accurately understood. Ethical approval

was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of research data.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Theme 1: Autonomy Within Institutional Boundaries

Participants consistently described work autonomy as existing within clearly defined institutional boundaries rather than as unrestricted professional freedom. In the interviews, teachers viewed autonomy as a practical space for making instructional decisions while remaining subject to organizational regulations, curriculum requirements, and principals' administrative authority. Rather than questioning the legitimacy of these structures, participants generally regarded them as a normal feature of working in Chinese public kindergartens. Their experiences therefore reflected an understanding of autonomy as conditional, negotiated, and embedded within institutional arrangements.

Teachers reported that they possessed considerable discretion in the implementation of teaching activities, including selecting instructional strategies, adapting classroom routines, and responding to children's individual needs. However, decisions regarding curriculum objectives, major educational initiatives, and organizational priorities were largely determined by the kindergarten or education authorities. As one participant explained, "The kindergarten gives a specific theme, and all course implementation must be based on this theme, but the way I carry it out can be decided by myself" (T1). This distinction between deciding how to teach rather than what to teach was repeatedly emphasized across participants' narratives.

At the same time, teachers experienced institutional control as an ordinary and expected part of their professional lives. Daily work was organized through fixed schedules, standardized lesson plans, routine inspections, and formal evaluation procedures. These managerial practices rarely appeared as isolated interventions; instead, they constituted the normal rhythm of everyday work. As T3 reflected, "We have gradually become used to it. Leaders propose an idea, and we implement it—it has become a habit." Similarly, T10 commented that inspections and administrative arrangements had simply become "part of daily work."

Although these institutional arrangements constrained teachers' decision-making, participants rarely described themselves as completely powerless. Instead, they interpreted autonomy as a limited but meaningful space in which professional judgment could still be exercised. Several teachers suggested that organizational rules provided the stability necessary for educational practice, while excessive restrictions reduced opportunities for creativity and responsiveness. Consequently, autonomy was experienced not as the absence of control but as the ability to exercise professional discretion within organizational expectations.

Taken together, these findings indicate that teachers understood work autonomy as a bounded and relational experience. Institutional structures simultaneously enabled and constrained professional action, creating a form of autonomy that was continuously negotiated within the everyday realities of organizational life.

3.2 Theme 2: Negotiating Autonomy Through Adaptation and Relationships

Rather than responding to institutional constraints through direct resistance, participants described autonomy as something that was continually negotiated through adaptation, self-regulation, and relationships with principals. Teachers actively adjusted their behaviors and expectations in order to maintain professional functioning while preserving as much autonomy as possible. Their accounts suggest that autonomy was not simply granted by organizational structures but co-constructed through everyday interactions with leadership.

One common strategy involved complying with administrative expectations while retaining a degree of personal discretion in classroom practice. Several teachers explained that when they disagreed with a principal's decision, they typically implemented the required task first before considering possible adjustments during implementation. As T10 explained, "When I have different ideas about the principal's arrangements, I usually follow the requirements first." Similarly, T4 remarked, "Basically, whatever the leader says, I will change it," emphasizing that timely adjustment was often viewed as the most practical way to avoid unnecessary conflict. Rather than indicating passive obedience, these responses reflected teachers' efforts to balance professional judgment with organizational expectations.

Participants also described various forms of self-regulation that enabled them to cope with limited decision-making authority. Many intentionally reduced their emotional investment in administrative tasks that they considered unavoidable, choosing instead to concentrate their energy on classroom teaching and children's learning. As T2 noted, "I just want to complete it as efficiently as possible. I don't spend much time thinking about whether I like this kind of task." Others described learning to regulate their emotions by accepting constraints that they believed could not be changed. Such strategies helped teachers maintain psychological stability while continuing to perform their professional responsibilities.

Importantly, participants emphasized that supportive leadership significantly expanded their willingness to exercise professional autonomy. When principals trusted teachers, provided resources, and refrained from excessive intervention, teachers reported feeling more confident in experimenting with new ideas and making instructional decisions. T1 recalled that whenever she proposed an innovative activity, her principal not only encouraged the idea but also provided the necessary resources to implement it. Likewise, T10 described a vice principal who preferred to ask reflective questions rather than dictate solutions, allowing teachers to refine their own ideas instead of simply following

instructions.

These experiences highlight the relational nature of autonomy. Teachers were more willing to express professional opinions, initiate new practices, and engage in creative teaching when they experienced trust, respect, and supportive communication. In this sense, autonomy emerged not only from formal decision-making authority but also from leadership relationships that fostered psychological safety and professional confidence.

3.3 Theme 3: Emotional Costs and the Reconstruction of Professional Agency

Participants consistently described work autonomy as carrying significant emotional costs. While institutional structures and supportive leadership shaped opportunities for autonomous action, sustained workload, administrative demands, and accountability pressures gradually reduced teachers' capacity to exercise professional judgment. Rather than experiencing autonomy simply as a matter of decision-making authority, participants increasingly associated it with having sufficient emotional, cognitive, and temporal resources to act according to their professional beliefs.

Heavy workload emerged as one of the most frequently discussed constraints on autonomy. Teachers explained that extensive documentation, inspections, competitions, and administrative tasks occupied time that they wished to devote to children's learning and development. As T8 observed, time spent completing paperwork inevitably reduced opportunities to interact meaningfully with children. T3 similarly described working late into the evening for extended periods, eventually feeling "too tired to cope" with the continuous demands of daily work. Under these conditions, teachers perceived autonomy as gradually compressed, not because they completely lost decision-making opportunities, but because they no longer possessed the energy required to exercise them.

Emotional exhaustion also affected participants' sense of professional agency. Several teachers reported becoming increasingly hesitant to express new ideas or challenge existing arrangements after repeated experiences of rejection or excessive workload. Others described feelings of helplessness, frustration, and emotional numbness that gradually diminished their motivation to initiate change. As T11 explained, prolonged pressure eventually reached a point where she "could not think at all," while T15 compared her psychological state to "an arrow on the bowstring," constantly under tension and unable to relax. These accounts suggest that emotional exhaustion constrained not only teachers' well-being but also their perceived capacity to act as autonomous professionals.

Despite these challenges, participants did not abandon their professional ideals. Instead, they gradually reconstructed their understanding of autonomy in ways that were more compatible with organizational realities. Rather than aspiring to unrestricted independence, teachers increasingly defined autonomy as having sufficient trust, professional respect, and meaningful space to make decisions that benefited children. As T1 explained, ideal autonomy meant "being given sufficient trust and space to exercise professional judgment within a shared educational goal," while T2 described it as being able to "want to do, dare to do, and not be afraid of making mistakes." These aspirations reveal that teachers viewed autonomy as fundamentally relational rather than individualistic.

Overall, participants' experiences suggest that work autonomy is neither a fixed professional right nor a stable organizational condition. Instead, it is a dynamic process through which teachers continually reinterpret, negotiate, and reconstruct their professional agency in response to changing institutional demands, leadership relationships, and everyday educational practice.

4 DISCUSSION

This study explored how Chinese public kindergarten teachers experience and make sense of work autonomy under principals' leadership. The findings suggest that teacher autonomy is neither an individual attribute nor a fixed organizational condition. Instead, it is a dynamic and relational process that is continuously negotiated within institutional structures, leadership practices, and everyday professional interactions. By examining teachers' lived experiences, this study extends current understandings of work autonomy beyond the dominant perspective that treats autonomy as a measurable organizational resource.

The first finding highlights that teachers experienced autonomy within clearly defined institutional boundaries rather than as unrestricted professional freedom. Although participants were able to exercise professional judgment in classroom implementation, major decisions regarding curriculum priorities, organizational goals, and administrative arrangements remained largely centralized. This finding both supports and extends Self-Determination Theory [20]. While SDT emphasizes autonomy as the experience of volition, the present study suggests that such experiences can emerge even when formal decision-making authority is limited. Teachers derived a sense of autonomy from exercising discretion within organizational expectations rather than from complete independence. This finding also resonates with previous research showing that teacher autonomy is shaped by institutional contexts rather than existing outside them. This interpretation aligns with recent perspectives that conceptualize teacher autonomy as an ecological and contextually situated phenomenon rather than an individual characteristic [8,6].

The second finding demonstrates that autonomy was actively negotiated through adaptation and relationships with principals. Rather than openly resisting organizational constraints, teachers adopted strategies such as selective compliance, emotional self-regulation, and pragmatic adjustment to maintain professional functioning. More importantly, supportive leadership strengthened teachers' willingness to exercise professional judgment by fostering trust, psychological safety, and opportunities for initiative. These findings highlight the relational nature of autonomy and suggest that principals influence autonomy not only through formal authority but also through everyday

interpersonal interactions. From the perspective of Foucault's theory of power, power should not be understood solely as restrictive or coercive. Instead, it operates through everyday organizational practices and relationships that simultaneously constrain and enable professional action. Supportive leadership therefore represents a productive form of power that creates conditions under which teachers are more willing to engage in autonomous practice. Similar findings have also been reported in studies demonstrating that school leadership shapes teachers' professional autonomy primarily through organizational climate and relational processes [11,12].

The third finding reveals that autonomy is closely connected with teachers' emotional experiences. Sustained workload, accountability pressures, and administrative demands gradually reduced participants' capacity to exercise professional judgment, even when formal opportunities for autonomy remained available. These findings suggest that autonomy depends not only on structural opportunities but also on teachers' emotional and cognitive resources. At the same time, participants did not abandon their professional aspirations. Instead, they reconstructed autonomy as a realistic and relational ideal grounded in trust, meaningful professional participation, and educational purpose. This dynamic process illustrates that professional agency is continuously reconstructed through teachers' interactions with institutional conditions rather than remaining stable across contexts. This finding also echoes studies indicating that emotional resources constitute an important condition for sustaining teachers' professional agency [9,21].

Overall, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it shifts attention from autonomy as a static organizational characteristic to autonomy as a lived and evolving experience. Second, by integrating Self-Determination Theory with Foucault's theory of power, it provides a more comprehensive explanation of how psychological experiences of autonomy are shaped by organizational power relations. Finally, the findings suggest that strengthening teacher autonomy requires more than increasing formal decision-making authority. Principals can foster autonomy by building trusting relationships, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, and creating organizational environments that support teachers' professional judgment and sustained engagement.

5 CONCLUSION

This study explored how Chinese public kindergarten teachers experience and make sense of work autonomy within the institutional and leadership contexts of public kindergartens. Using an IPA approach, the findings demonstrate that teacher autonomy is not a fixed professional right but a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent experience. Teachers exercised professional judgment within institutional boundaries, continuously negotiated autonomy through adaptation and relationships with principals, and reconstructed their professional agency in response to emotional demands and organizational constraints.

The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond conventional approaches that conceptualize teacher autonomy primarily as an individual characteristic or organizational resource. Instead, it highlights autonomy as an ongoing process of meaning-making situated within everyday organizational life. By integrating Self-Determination Theory and Foucault's theory of power, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological needs for autonomy are shaped through institutional structures, leadership practices, and interpersonal relationships.

The findings also have practical implications for educational leadership. Rather than focusing solely on increasing teachers' formal decision-making authority, principals should cultivate trusting relationships, reduce unnecessary administrative demands, and create organizational conditions that encourage teachers' professional judgment and initiative. Such leadership practices are more likely to support sustainable professional agency and improve teachers' work experiences.

As this study focused on teachers from public kindergartens in one region of China, future research could examine how work autonomy is experienced across different educational settings, cultural contexts, and leadership models. Comparative and longitudinal studies would further deepen understanding of how teacher autonomy develops over time and across institutional environments.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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