



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

# **A Comparative Study of Kindergarten Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy in China and Finland**

University of Helsinki  
Master's Programme in Changing  
Education  
Master's thesis, 30 cr  
Educational Sciences  
May 2025  
Shiyi Hu

Supervisor: Erika Löfström,  
Shuanghong Jenn Niu



Tiedekunta - Fakultet - Faculty Faculty of Educational Sciences, Master's Programme in Changing Education		
Tekijä - Författare - Author Shiyi Hu		
Työn nimi - Arbetets titel		
Title A Comparative Study of Kindergarten Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy in Finland and China		
Oppiaine - Läroämne - Subject Education		
Työn laji/ Ohjaaja - Arbetets art/Handledare - Level/Supervisor Master's thesis/Erika Löfström, Shuanghong Jenny Niu	Aika - Datum - Month and year May 2025	Sivumäärä - Sidoantal - Number of pages 63 pages + 4 pages of appendices
Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract <p>Many studies have shown that autonomy is essential for supporting teachers' professional identity, organizational belonging, and well-being. It also contributes to effective curriculum reform in complex teaching environments. Autonomy is described to be shaped by curriculum control, accountability, professional competence, and cultural context. It can be individual or collegial and operates across educational, social, developmental, and administrative domains, with schools and classrooms being the main arenas for curriculum practice. The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in the kindergarten teachers' perceptions of curriculum autonomy in China and Finland, in order to expand the current state of research on teacher autonomy that mostly focuses on a single country and favors a Eurocentric perspective.</p> <p>In this study, ten teachers (five from each country) were recruited through convenience sampling and participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in English and Chinese online. The interview questions were adapted from previous studies, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of Atlas.ti.</p> <p>Similarities in teachers' curriculum autonomy were found between the two countries during the stages of curriculum design and activity organization. These similarities were primarily influenced by the guiding role of curriculum policy documents, child-centered educational values, and a collaborative approach to decision-making in organizing activities. In contrast, no significant similarities were observed in the phase of curriculum evaluation. In addition, the study found differences in curriculum autonomy across all three implementation stages, particularly in curriculum design and activity organization. Here, the structure of organizational management and the nature of educational training influenced the degree of teachers' curriculum autonomy.</p>		
Avainsanat - Nyckelord		
Keywords Curriculum autonomy, Teacher autonomy, Curriculum implementation, Early childhood education, International study		
Säilytyspaikka - Förvaringsställe - Where deposited Helsinki University Library – Helda/E-thesis (theses)		
Muita tietoja - Övriga uppgifter - Additional information		



Tiedekunta - Fakultet - Faculty <b>Faculty of Educational Sciences</b>		
Tekijä - Författare - Author <b>Shiyi Hu</b>		
Työn nimi - Arbetets titel 在跨文化背景下，芬兰与中国幼儿园教师的课程自主权的比较研究		
Title <b>A Comparative Study of Kindergarten Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy in Finland and China</b>		
Oppiaine - Läroämne - Subject <b>Education</b>		
Työn laji/ Ohjaaja - Arbetets art/Handledare - Level/Supervisor <b>Master's Thesis / Erika Löfström Shuanghong Jenny Niu</b>	Aika - Datum - Month and year <b>May 2025</b>	Sivumäärä - Sidoantal - Number of pages <b>63 pages + 4 pages of appendices</b>
Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract <p>许多研究表明，自主权对提升教师的职业认同、机构归属感以及职业幸福感具有积极作用，在复杂多变的教學语境中是课程改革取得理想效果的重要保障。根据以往的研究，教师自主权受到课程控制、问责制、专业能力和文化处境等因素的影响，表现有个体自主权和合作自主权，并分为教育、社会、发展和行政四个领域。其中，教育领域的学校与教室维度是教师实施课程活动的主要场域。本研究的目的是检验中芬幼儿园教师的课程自主权的异同点，以拓展当前多聚焦单一国家、偏重欧洲中心视角的教师自主权研究现状。</p> <p>本研究通过便利抽样法招募了共 10 名教师（中国与芬兰各 5 名）作为参与者。研究的半结构化访谈以中英文的在线访谈进行。访谈问题改编自以往的研究，在数据分析阶段使用 Atlas.ti，采取主题分析法分析数据。</p> <p>结果显示，在课程实施的三个阶段中，两国教师的课程自主权在课程设计和活动组织阶段具有相似性，主要影响因素为课程政策文件的指导作用、儿童中心的教育价值观，以及在组织活动时的合作型决策方式。相比之下，在课程评价阶段没有发现任何相似之处。除此之外，两国教师的课程自主权在课程实施的每个阶段都存在差异，尤其是在课程设计和活动组织阶段，机构管理的结构和教育培训的性质影响着教师自主决策的程度。对中国教师而言，与课程质量有关的隐性安全规范和内部行政监督往往会限制他们的自主权。相比之下，芬兰教师更倾向于遵循标准化的、以流程为导向的安全规程和课程实施指南，从而在保持专业自由裁量权的同时，实现更大的一致性。</p>		
Avainsanat - Nyckelord		
Keywords 课程自主权，教师自主权，课程实施，学前教育，国际比较研究		
Säilytyspaikka - Förvaringsställe - Where deposited <b>Helsinki University Library – Helda/E-thesis (theses)</b>		
Muita tietoja - Övriga uppgifter - Additional information		

# Table of contents

1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND .....	3
2.1 Curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care.....	3
2.1.1 National Curriculum as the core principle .....	3
2.1.2 The ECEC curriculum and policy development in different contexts .....	5
2.1.3 The role of teachers in curriculum implementation .....	8
2.2 Teacher professionalism and curriculum autonomy .....	10
2.2.1 Teacher professionalism.....	10
2.2.2 Teacher autonomy and curriculum autonomy.....	11
2.2.3 Theoretical framework of teacher autonomy.....	13
2.2.4 Teachers' autonomous roles under different educational systems.....	15
3 RESEARCH TASK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	18
4 METHODOLOGY .....	20
4.1 Research design.....	20
4.2 Participants .....	20
4.3 Instruments and procedures .....	21
4.4 Data analysis .....	22
5 RESEARCH RESULTS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION .....	28
5.1 Similarities between Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers' curriculum autonomy .....	28
5.1.1 The guiding roles of policy documents, child-centered educational values, and organizational culture in curriculum and instructional design .....	28
5.1.2 Collaborative decision-making serves as the primary approach to organizing curriculum activities .....	34
5.1.3 Evaluation on teachers' curriculum implementation.....	35
5.2 Differences between Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers' curriculum autonomy .....	35
5.2.1 Curriculum and instructional design .....	35
5.2.2 Curriculum activity organization .....	39
5.2.3 Evaluation on curriculum implementation .....	41
5.3 Summary of the findings .....	44
6 VALIDITY .....	46
6.1 Credibility .....	46
6.2 Transferability .....	46

6.3 Dependability .....	46
6.4 Confirmability .....	47
7 DISCUSSION .....	48
7.1 Curriculum autonomy across curriculum implementation stages.....	48
7.2 Organizational and cultural influences on curriculum autonomy.....	51
8 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	54
SOURCES .....	56
APPENDICES:.....	64

## TABLES

Table 1. Participants .....	21
Table 2. Curriculum and Instructional Design .....	23
Table 2. Curriculum and Instructional Design .....	24
Table 3. Curriculum Activity Organization .....	25
Table 4. Curriculum Evaluation Criteria .....	26

# 1 Introduction

Early childhood education curriculum policy has increasingly followed a global trend toward nationalization and systematization. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that systematic, cross-sectoral early childhood policies and curricula are key pathways toward achieving sustainable development in education. The OECD (2021, 2023), in its reports on early childhood education and care (ECEC), similarly highlights the importance of curriculum flexibility, alignment of goals, and strong support mechanisms for teachers. Teachers play a vital role in implementing curriculum policy. Once public education sets forth its vision through national curricular standards, it is ultimately teachers who are responsible for mediating teaching and learning to realize educational aims. This mediation relies heavily on teachers' capacity for curriculum judgment, contextual interpretation, and everyday decision-making—all of which relate closely to autonomy, particularly in ECEC. Unlike primary, secondary, or higher education, which are strongly knowledge-oriented, early childhood teaching emphasizes emotional care, responsiveness to children's complex and dynamic life experiences, and sensitivity to developmental variation. In this context, autonomy becomes an essential condition for teachers to effectively navigate the fluid demands of their work (Löfgren, 2015; Osgood, 2012).

However, teacher autonomy is not always fully realized, and the space for decision-making is often constrained or distorted. Demands from educational policy and accountability mechanism can exert dual pressures on teachers, shaping how they perceive their professional roles and, in turn, affecting the outcomes of curriculum reform (Vuorisalo et al., 2014; Steenbeek & van Geert, 2017; Huo, 2022; Hedges, 2000; Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). Teachers' professional capacities and cultural contexts also influence their pedagogical judgments (Liu et al., 2008; Frostenson, 2015; Tuul et al., 2015; Kang, 2016; Devjak et al., 2020; Birbili & Myrovali, 2019). To support sustainable curriculum reform and ensure the emotional sustainability and well-being of kindergarten teachers, more attention should be paid to their professional autonomy—especially as experienced in daily teaching.

Teacher autonomy refers to teachers' ascribed ability to make decisions through professional action within legal and institutional frameworks (Wermke & Höstfält, 2013)—either individually or collaboratively with others within the organization (Frostenson, 2015; Ahonen et al., 2023; Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2019). It is not simply a matter of individual freedom. Decision-making and control are central themes in understanding teacher autonomy (Salokangas et al., 2020). According to Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.69), autonomy is primarily situated in the educational domain, especially at the school and classroom levels. They argue that the key issue is how teachers navigate the tension between freedom and control within complex educational systems, making autonomy a deeply context-dependent concept (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.35).

Nevertheless, most existing research on teacher autonomy has focused on primary and secondary education, with limited attention to early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts (Erss, 2018; Salokangas et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2020). Even in Finland, a country often cited for its high level of teacher autonomy, empirical research on early childhood teachers remains scarce. Moreover, much of the literature addresses general professional autonomy rather than curriculum-specific autonomy. Cross-cultural comparative studies are also limited, resulting in a Europe-centric understanding of teacher autonomy.

At the same time, policy developments in mainland China have increasingly emphasized research-oriented professionalism, child-centered pedagogies, and play-based learning—sharing key features with Finland's curriculum reform agenda. Therefore, to expand current research beyond single-country and Eurocentric perspectives, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with ten kindergarten teachers in China and Finland. By centering teachers' voices, the study aims to better understand how broader cultural, organizational, and pedagogical factors relate to teachers' curriculum autonomy in everyday practice, and to deepen the understanding of teacher autonomy as a context-sensitive concept.

## **2 Theoretical background**

This section aims to define key concepts, review highly relevant literature, and outline the theoretical framework of the study. Specifically, the first part clarifies the concept of curriculum, analyzes and compares curriculum policy contexts between Finland and China, and explains the significant roles that teachers play within these contexts. The second part defines the central concept of teacher curriculum autonomy and further elaborates on the theoretical framework adopted by this research. Given the literature retrieved using the keywords “kindergarten,” “early childhood education and care,” and “curriculum autonomy” is limited, the researcher expanded the search scope by including terms such as “teacher autonomy,” and “teacher agency,” conducting searches on platforms like Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, ERIC and CNKI.

### **2.1 Curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care**

Education exists as a subsystem within the broader social system, and its essential function lies in supplying qualified individuals to other systems (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 37). Consequently, education inevitably interacts continuously with other functional systems, requiring responsive mechanisms (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 37). This interaction implies that education itself must maintain a certain degree of autonomy, enabling flexibility between its internal functions and external demands, thus swiftly adapting policies to align with evolving societal expectations (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 37). However, public education, as a particular form of education, essentially involves individuals coming together to acquire predetermined behaviors, skills, and knowledge, which inevitably leads to establishing relatively stable norms and frameworks for teaching and learning.

#### **2.1.1 National Curriculum as the core principle**

Curriculum is defined as commonly accepted knowledge selected and documented in official texts (Hopmann, 1999). Apple (2018), from a sociological perspective, critiques the nature of curriculum, arguing that it is not a neutral body

of knowledge but rather shaped by social, political, and economic factors. A key function of curriculum is legitimizing the existing social order, persuading people to accept the perceived rationality arranged by the educational system (Apple, 2018). Similarly, Pinar (2013, p.406) emphasizes the selective nature of curriculum, yet focuses more on curriculum as a complex dialogue among individuals, historical contexts, present concerns, and future aspirations.

From concept to text, the public curriculum goes through a process of collective interpretation. Hopmann (1999) indicates that highly public curriculum planning usually involves three main actors: top-level policymakers, teachers, and the public, though their levels of participation differ depending on the context. Furthermore, researchers emphasize that curriculum planning should not only include normative and ideological guidance at the macro-political level but also institutional-level document preparation and actual classroom-level implementation (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022). Therefore, after systematic planning, curriculum eventually takes concrete textual forms such as curriculum guidelines, syllabi, and textbooks. These texts solidify abstract curriculum ideas into standardized forms, becoming the specific basis for teaching practices and forming the primary and most significant reference framework for teachers (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.74).

When teachers' roles resemble those of civil servants, official government curriculum policies become particularly important because teachers' instructional activities are limited within clearly defined boundaries, especially regarding specific subject teaching. Shulman (1998) argues that curriculum frameworks generally imply fixed teaching methods, which reduce uncertainties and potential risks in teaching but may also serve as excuses when teaching quality fluctuates. However, although curriculum represent ideal visions of education, there is always a gap between prescribed curriculum standards and the everyday reality of school practice. Experiences and expectations of students, parents, and teachers each influence the actual implementation of curriculum. Consequently, curriculum content and methods of implementation inevitably undergo continuous and dynamic adjustments in response to changing social demands within diverse and practical contexts.

### **2.1.2 The ECEC curriculum and policy development in different contexts**

Due to the international comparative nature of this study, familiarizing oneself with early childhood education and care (ECEC) curriculum policies in different contexts is a prerequisite for conducting the investigation. At the same time, the methodological guidelines for comparative education research must also be clarified before one can fully understand the specific educational context.

#### *Internationally comparative studies in education*

Some researchers criticize standardized comparative educational studies, such as OECD-led international assessments (e.g., PISA), for reinforcing the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. They argue that focusing on local-level educational systems better reveals the complexity of curriculum policies (Guevara, 2022). Furthermore, researchers' cultural biases may influence interpretations of educational systems. When global early childhood education policies emphasize "quality" defined by Western scholars' notion of "best practices," the policy recommendations inevitably exhibit a Eurocentric tendency (Sousa & Moss, 2022). However, compared to educational practices at other levels or subjects, the quality of early childhood education practice is more challenging to measure due to its child-centered, integrated learning, and play-based pedagogies. Thus, comparative studies in this field should emphasize exploring differences rather than seeking a singular "best solution," which is also one of the objectives of this study (Nóvoa, 2018).

#### *A brief history of ECEC development*

In the early stages, kindergartens primarily functioned as childcare institutions, addressing the need to care for children while their parents were working. During this period, the educational function of kindergartens was relatively weak, and the concept of curriculum had not yet clearly emerged. It was not until Froebel introduced the idea of education-oriented kindergartens, emphasizing systematic teaching methods, that the educational role of kindergartens gradually expanded

(Tafa, 2008). In the 20th century, several clear ECEC models emerged in Europe, such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia curricula. In the same period, influenced by the New Culture Movement and Dewey's pragmatism, Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin developed theories such as "Life Education" and "Living Education," establishing a distinctly Chinese approach to ECEC (Pan & Xia, 2015). International educational models such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and High Scope have significantly influenced ECEC practices in China since the 1980s (Fan, 2024).

Currently, ECEC curricula are gradually becoming nationalized and systematized. UNESCO (2021) highlights that promoting systematic, multi-sectoral cooperation in ECEC policies and curricula is crucial for sustainable educational development. Additionally, the OECD (2021, 2023) emphasizes in its reports that curricula not only determine teaching content but also guide how teachers interact with children, families, and the environment, thus significantly impacting the process quality of teaching. Moreover, flexibility in curriculum implementation, clarity of educational goals, and supportive mechanisms for teachers are considered equally important (OECD, 2021, 2023).

### *Finnish educational context*

In Finland, educational policies for children aged 0–6 are jointly developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education, emphasizing decentralization and localization of curriculum design (Simola et al., 2013). To date, there has been only one national-level curriculum document (Finnish ECEC Core Curriculum, NCC, 2022). Local municipalities are required to develop local ECEC curricula based on this national core curriculum (NCC, 2022). Educational institutions, including public and private kindergartens as well as family daycare centers—implement teaching activities based on these municipal-level curricula.

Finnish ECEC curriculum aligns closely with the broader national educational values of equality and inclusiveness, explicitly underscored in the Finnish ECEC Core Curriculum. Finnish curriculum emphasize children's agency, where

teachers design activities based on children's interests, ensuring substantial autonomy in their learning processes. This principle is also reflected in widely used individual development plans (IDPs), collaboratively designed by teachers, guardians, and special education teachers, tailored to each child's unique needs and interests (Heiskanen et al., 2019).

Despite curriculum frameworks established by the Ministry of Education, a decentralized model is adopted in Finland, encouraging local decision-making and curricular flexibility in schools (Niemi et al., 2018; Niu et al., 2024). There are also established quality assessment standards to ensure compliance with curricular policies. However, ECEC quality assessments are conducted nationally by the independent agency KARVI, incorporating diverse aspects such as educational quality, inclusiveness, curriculum implementation, and teacher development into their framework (Karvi, 2023, 2024). Additionally, Finnish municipalities evaluate local curriculum implementation, and educational institutions are required to self-assess and continuously improve their educational practices (NCC ECEC, 2022). These differing approaches to curriculum directly influence teachers' roles and instructional methods, providing an essential perspective for understanding teacher curriculum autonomy.

### *Chinese educational context*

In contrast, policy formulation in mainland China is more centralized. Over time, three separate national guidelines have been released, demonstrating a trend towards increasing standardization. These documents include the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (KEG, 2001), Early Learning and Development Guidelines (ELDG, 2012), and Childcare Institution Care Guidance Outline (CICGO, 2021). Care policies for children aged 0–3 are overseen by the National Health Commission, while educational policies for ages 3–6 are centrally managed by the Ministry of Education.

Early childhood curricula in mainland China exhibit a more structured, teacher-directed approach. Teaching goals and methods are closely aligned with specific age groups, clearly positioning teachers as facilitators and directors of age-

specific educational activities. Teachers adopt a combination of direct and indirect instructional strategies, designing engaging activities to increase children's participation. Niu et al. (2024) point out in their comparative analysis that China's two most representative documents are ELDG (2012) and KEG (2001). ELDG complements KEG by providing more specific, clear guidance for teachers. Its structured goal-setting and clearly delineated age-specific instructional methods notably reduce the complexity of instructional planning, particularly for novice teachers (Niu et al., 2024).

Assessment standards are also adopted in China. The Chinese Ministry of Education released Guidelines for the Quality Assessment of Kindergarten Childcare Education in 2022, assessing childcare education quality through clearly defined indicators across areas including educational direction, childcare and safety, educational processes, environmental design, and teacher qualifications (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, n.d.).

In both countries, national curriculum documents play a crucial role in guiding the overarching curriculum frameworks and educational goals and are centrally administered by national education authorities. Curricula in both countries emphasize a child-centered approach, promoting holistic child development across areas such as health and physical activity, language, socio-cultural competencies, science, and the arts (Niu et al., 2024). More over, the importance of creating supportive environments and fostering cooperation between kindergartens and families is a shared understanding (Niu et al., 2024; Qi, 2019).

### **2.1.3 The role of teachers in curriculum implementation**

Since people often have idealized expectations for curriculum, curriculum policies can sometimes be burdened with unrealistic hopes beyond their practical capabilities, ultimately transferring these expectations onto teachers during implementation. Curriculum implementation is about how teachers organize educational activities and choose appropriate teaching methods to ensure effective student learning experiences (Han & Weiss, 2005). This process involves not merely executing prescribed syllabi but also adapting and adjusting

teaching activities according to specific classroom situations and student needs (Clayback et al., 2022; Madondo, 2020).

However, the effectiveness of curriculum implementation is influenced by school and environmental factors, as well as the level of administrative support provided to teachers (Clayback et al., 2022; Madondo, 2020). If curriculum reforms are rushed, teachers may lack sufficient understanding of the new curriculum, which can lower their sense of self-efficacy and lead to stress from excessive teaching responsibilities, negatively affecting implementation outcomes (Clayback et al., 2022; Mabunda, 2023). Therefore, curriculum implementation is not a value-neutral process (Hopmann, 1999). This is particularly evident in ECEC environment.

Curriculum implementation in ECEC is not a static execution but rather a dynamic process that continuously adapts based on children's needs and teaching feedback. Thus, teachers must not only organize teaching activities within curriculum frameworks but also continuously innovate curricula based on classroom realities, acting like researchers to enhance teaching quality (Vuorisalo et al., 2014; Steenbeek, H & Geert, V. P., 2017; Huo, 2022; Hedges, 2000). However, research also indicates that as external accountability pressures intensify, teacher autonomy is gradually weakened, transforming teachers increasingly into mere deliverers of prescribed content rather than active creators of curriculum (Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015).

Meanwhile, interaction is the essence of curriculum implementation in kindergartens. Education fundamentally arises from the interactions between teachers and children, a process characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. Teachers need to capture and respond instantly to children's genuine thoughts and needs, avoiding overly rigid methods of forcing children to learn particular knowledge or skills (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.36). Based on the above considerations, this research conceptualizes kindergarten teachers' curriculum implementation as consisting of three stages: curriculum design, which involves teachers' interpretation of official curricula, the organization of

teaching activities; and the evaluation of teaching quality at the end of implementation (Han & Weiss, 2005; Clayback et al., 2022).

To ensure education truly fulfills its mission, serious consideration must be given to how teachers can realize their professional autonomy without being restricted by narrow curriculum frameworks, thus preventing professional burnout. The next section further discusses teacher professionalism, elaborates on the concept and dimensions of teacher autonomy, and explores key factors influencing curriculum autonomy.

## **2.2 Teacher professionalism and curriculum autonomy**

This chapter first explores the concept of teacher professionalism, subsequently defining teacher curriculum autonomy. Through a review of existing research, it analyzes specific factors influencing teacher autonomy across various contexts, particularly highlighting the unique challenges teachers face in ECEC settings. Finally, this chapter introduces a theoretical framework for teacher autonomy, laying a foundation for formulating and discussing subsequent research questions.

### **2.2.1 Teacher professionalism**

Teacher professionalism is closely related to the social and policy environment in which teachers operate. Because teachers' work is difficult to evaluate by a single standard, their professionalism encompasses not only academic knowledge and teaching skills but also significant influences from governance regimes and civil society (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.2). Education provided by teachers includes not only knowledge and skills but also values, social norms, and moral behaviors. Particularly in ECEC, where children's socio-emotional skills are emphasized, teachers must guide children's socialization based on specific socio-cultural values (McDonough, 2010; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.98). Consequently, teacher professionalism evolves continuously in response to changing social, political, and cultural contexts (Lawn, 1989).

Webb et al. (2004), in their comparative study of primary teachers' professional qualities in Britain and Finland, found that teacher autonomy and decision-making power are crucial components of teacher professionalism. Teachers' perceptions and understandings of their autonomy significantly influence curriculum implementation outcomes (Webb et al., 2004). However, Policies increasingly demand documented evidence of teachers' professionalism rather than trusting their professional judgment (Ball, 2006; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Löfgren, 2015).

In ECEC settings, teacher professionalism is highly personalized and emotionally driven (Löfgren, 2015; Osgood, 2012). Interactions between teachers, children, and families rely heavily on emotional care, and this emotional labor, together with standardized teaching skills, forms a fundamental part of early childhood educational processes (Löfgren, 2015; Osgood, 2012). Intensified accountability systems might push teachers to abandon more creative and personalized educational practices to comply with regulatory frameworks or satisfy parental expectations, sometimes even conflicting with their own educational beliefs. Therefore, effectively utilizing curriculum autonomy to achieve more creative and personalized educational goals and ideals is an essential topic for further exploration, particularly when kindergarten teachers face multiple professional role expectations.

### **2.2.2 Teacher autonomy and curriculum autonomy**

In European studies, teacher autonomy is commonly defined as a state of self-governance, specifically the ability to make decisions through their actions within legal and institutional frameworks (Wermke & Höstfält, 2013). However, teacher autonomy is not purely individual freedom; rather, it remains deeply influenced and constrained by broader social contexts, policies, and institutional structures, given the inherently public nature of education (Wermke & Höstfält, 2013; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.6). Thus, regardless of educational stage, teacher autonomy is interconnected with other institutional members through collaborative decision-making, forming a collegial professional autonomy (Frostenson, 2015; Ahonen et al., 2023; Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2019).

Existing studies attempt to analyze the complex concept of teacher autonomy from various dimensions. Wermke and Höstfält (2013) differentiate teacher autonomy into two dimensions: institutional autonomy, emphasizing teachers' collective rights within national governance frameworks, and service autonomy, focusing on teachers' decision-making freedom in classroom practice. This distinction highlights the dynamic tension between macro-level governance systems and micro-level daily teaching practices (Wermke & Höstfält, 2013). Further refining this concept, Erss (2018) proposes three dimensions: "self-directedness," "capacity for autonomous action," and "freedom from control." Compared to the former perspective, this framework emphasizes more explicitly how teachers achieve autonomous decision-making in specific contexts and clearly highlights the constraints imposed by external control (Erss, 2018). To simplify, autonomy fundamentally revolves around decision-making and control, explicitly reflecting teachers' dual roles as both implementers of policy and subjects of control (Salokangas et al., 2020).

In Chinese scholarship, teacher autonomy tends to be described as "professional autonomy," emphasizing teachers' rights in professional judgment, execution, and protection against external interference, spanning various dimensions such as teaching, research, management, and professional development (Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2020). This terminology likely reflects a cultural tradition within Chinese teaching communities that strongly emphasizes professional ethics and standards. It also implies that while teacher autonomy shares cross-cultural commonalities, the concept and dimensions are shaped by differences in local governance models and teachers' role perceptions (Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2020).

Within the specific context of ECEC, teacher autonomy can be further focused on the curriculum level. Xia et al. (2021) distinguish between "curriculum autonomy" at the classroom level and "general teaching autonomy" at the kindergarten institutional level. This distinction highlights varying degrees of decision-making spaces for kindergarten teachers across different educational contexts. Tuul et al. (2015) express a similar viewpoint in their study in Estonia but notably emphasize the tension between national curricula and localized kindergarten curricula. This indicates that early childhood teachers' curriculum autonomy

involves not only individual teacher actions but also restrictions imposed by the curriculum policy environment (Tuul et al., 2015). Erss et al. (2016) further analyze teacher autonomy directly within the interrelationship of curriculum enactment, curriculum control, and teachers' perceptions of autonomy. They illustrate how curriculum deeply shapes teachers' practices, underscoring autonomy as a core element of professionalism (Erss et al., 2016) .

Considering that this study specifically examines kindergarten teachers' perceptions of curriculum autonomy in China and Finland, it aligns with the perspectives of Erss et al. (2016) and Xia et al. (2021), defining teacher curriculum autonomy clearly as the perceived decision-making space teachers have in classrooms and schools when interpreting and implementing national curriculum policies. This definition acknowledges curriculum autonomy as a personal perceptual concept embedded in teachers' lived experiences, recognizing external constraints, and thus better captures the realities faced by kindergarten teachers in curriculum implementation (Erss et al., 2016; Xia et al., 2021).

### **2.2.3 Theoretical framework of teacher autonomy**

In summary, teacher autonomy is not a singular or fixed concept, but rather a dynamic, multidimensional construct. Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.8) identify an "autonomy paradox," emphasizing that increased autonomy does not always lead to improved teaching outcomes. Under neoliberal education systems, granting teachers greater freedom often simultaneously increases their responsibilities and pressures (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.8). In such contexts, teachers may even choose to relinquish some autonomy voluntarily, as excessive decision-making freedom often introduces additional complexity and risks to their work (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.137). Consequently, what teachers truly need is not pure freedom but an appropriate degree of decision-making space, guided and supported by a clear framework. In other words, ideal teacher autonomy involves striking a careful balance between autonomy and control, rather than pursuing maximal freedom blindly.

Drawing on this dialectical understanding of autonomy, this study adopts the analytical framework proposed by Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.46) as its theoretical reference. This framework conceptualizes teacher autonomy as a matrix intersecting three horizontal dimensions (levels) and four vertical dimensions (domains) (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.46). Within this framework, the three levels of autonomy reflect the teacher's professional context, progressing from micro to macro level, including the classroom level, school level, and professional level (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.44).

1. The classroom level refers to teachers' operational scope within their daily classroom practices. Even in kindergarten or daycare institutions, educational work still occurs within administratively defined class units and physical classroom spaces. Thus, this dimension explores how kindergarten teachers act professionally within class units (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.44).
2. The school level, compared to the classroom level, represents a more complex social system in which teachers must interact with other social roles such as colleagues, principals, special education teachers, teaching assistants, and parents. Since interactions occur within mutually influencing fields, an individual's autonomy may either facilitate or constrain the autonomy of others (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.44).
3. The professional level represents the broadest dimension, encompassing collective autonomy across the entire teaching profession. It includes various aspects of professional life, from basic educational background and academic knowledge to ongoing professional development and academic training (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.44).

The four domains are categorized according to teachers' primary responsibilities: educational domain, administrative domain, social domain, and developmental domain (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p.45). Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.45) acknowledge these domains are not strictly distinct and often overlap in practice. However, this structured categorization enables a more nuanced

discussion of teacher autonomy, making it adaptable across different national, policy, and cultural contexts.

Given that this study specifically analyzes curriculum autonomy, and considering kindergarten teachers face distinctly different decision-making spaces compared to teachers at other educational stages. Therefore, this study focuses on kindergarten teachers' perceptions of autonomy in different curriculum implementation stages: curriculum and instructional planning, activity organization, and evaluation on teaching quality to closely align with the specific kindergarten teaching context under investigation.

#### **2.2.4 Teachers' autonomous roles under different educational systems**

Studies from different contexts reveal significant variations in teachers' curriculum autonomy, indicating that its essence extends beyond merely the amount of power teachers have; rather, it involves the structural relationship between institutional frameworks and teachers' roles (Erss, 2018; Salokangas et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2016; Xia et al., 2021; Tuul et al., 2015; Kang, 2016; Frostenson, 2015; Devjak et al., 2020; Birbili & Myrovali, 2019).

In Finland, teachers are widely trusted as professionals with sound judgment, granting them not only freedom in curriculum implementation but also active roles in adapting and recreating curriculum content (Erss, 2018; Salokangas et al., 2020). This autonomy is rooted in their strong identification with the national curriculum framework (Erss, 2018; Salokangas et al., 2020). In contrast, although teachers in Germany and Estonia also seek some degree of freedom, they typically operate within clearly defined boundaries (Erss, 2018). Estonian teachers, in particular, tend to balance curriculum autonomy with external guidance, illustrating a tension between professional independence and dependence (Erss, 2018). Similarly, in Ireland, teachers' decision-making spaces are more limited by institutional regulations, with fewer opportunities to participate in school-level decision-making (Salokangas et al., 2020).

In China, kindergarten teachers' curriculum autonomy demonstrates a picture characterized by expanded formality but restricted substance (Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2016; Xia et al., 2021). Although existing research indicates that teachers' perceptions of curriculum no longer entirely depend on administrative commands or expert instructions, their implementation in instructional activities remains significantly constrained by educational administration (Liu et al., 2008). Especially in reforms advocating play-based curriculum, teachers often face disciplinary constraints, making it challenging to genuinely reconstruct the curriculum according to their professional judgment (Zhang, 2016). Xia et al. (2021) further argue that even as curriculum become more open, teachers still lack clear awareness of their roles within institutional affairs, with autonomy remaining largely operational rather than substantive.

Influences on teacher autonomy are not limited to institutional structures; teachers' professionalism and cultural contexts also play crucial roles. Teachers with higher-quality training are more likely to proactively adjust curricula, and more experienced teachers are inclined to respond critically to curriculum frameworks (Tuul et al., 2015; Kang, 2016). However, teacher culture often shapes implicit collective norms. In conservative professional cultures, teachers tend to suppress individual judgment to maintain group conformity, with collegial autonomy potentially transforming into a mechanism of control, restricting personal professional expression (Liu et al., 2008; Frostenson, 2015).

Additionally, curriculum evaluation systems, and societal expectations also impose external limitations. Slovakian research reveals that teachers with greater freedom in choosing teaching methods are more likely to encourage children's participation and exploration, whereas highly controlled curriculum systems foster more directive, controlling instructional practices (Devjak et al., 2020). Thus, when teachers face increased accountability pressures, and curriculum decision-making is driven by market logic, implementing child-centered teaching philosophies becomes challenging (Wermke & Höstfält, 2013).

Moreover, decentralization does not necessarily equate to reduced disciplinary control; administrative power might simply reorganize itself in different forms.

Even in decentralized educational systems like Finland, as parental influence intensifies, administrative authorities may act as buffers, mitigating teachers' social responsibilities, but they may also utilize parental feedback as managerial tools, indirectly limiting teachers' autonomy (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.90). Meanwhile, teacher autonomy, if lacking collective norms and professional accountability, could lead to deviations from educational objectives. The Greek case demonstrates how individual teachers may strategically equate autonomy with personal expression, superficially complying while substantively diverging from national curriculum expectations (Birbili & Myrovali, 2019).

### **3 Research task and research questions**

In conclusion, if we understand teacher autonomy as the right to exercise professional judgment within a given framework (Wilches, 2007), then ideally, teachers should not only have freedom in curriculum implementation but also the opportunity to participate actively in shaping curriculum frameworks. In reality, however, teachers often lack both the awareness and opportunities to voice their perspectives and are constrained by multiple factors such as organizational structures, cultural expectations, and professional hierarchies, making it challenging for them to truly influence curriculum directions (Clayback et al., 2022; Mabunda, 2023; Madondo, 2020; Zhang, 2016; Xia et al., 2021; Wermke & Höstfält, 2013).

Kindergarten teachers often experience high turnover rates and low job stability (Bassok et al., 2021; Totenhagen et al., 2016). Although the influencing factors are complex, it is widely acknowledged that professional autonomy positively impacts teachers' professional identity, organizational affiliation, and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Shim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Worth & Van, 2020). Curriculum autonomy is thus more than simply delegating authority; it relates directly to how teachers are defined and supported within organizational structures, and whether they can develop stable, reflective teaching judgments amidst pressures and uncertainties. As a fundamental right within educational culture, teacher autonomy deserves systematic understanding and active advocacy.

While international comparative research on teacher autonomy has expanded significantly in recent years, most studies have concentrated on secondary education and subject-specific teachers, with limited attention given to early childhood education contexts. Even in Finland, a country widely recognized for granting considerable autonomy to teachers, empirical research specifically focusing on ECEC teachers remains scarce. Meanwhile, China is undergoing educational reforms emphasizing pedagogical professionalism, child-centered practices, and play-based curricula, showing considerable similarities with

Finland regarding macro-policy trends and curriculum philosophies (Zhu, 2008; Qi, 2019; Niu et al., 2024).

However, the cultural differences between the two countries in curriculum control methods and the professional roles assigned to teachers may significantly influence how teacher autonomy is practiced. Systematic comparative research addressing these nuances is currently lacking. Therefore, to broaden the existing teacher autonomy literature, which is predominantly single-country focused and Eurocentric, this study will adopt the perspective of teachers, examining their lived experiences and reflections on curriculum practices, focusing mainly three stages: curriculum and instructional design, curriculum activity organization, and evaluation on curriculum implementation. Based on this, the research question is proposed:

Research question: What are kindergarten teachers' perceptions on their curriculum autonomy in China and Finland across different stages of curriculum implementation?

The research question can be divided into two sub-questions:

1. What are the similarities of kindergarten teachers' perceptions on their curriculum autonomy in China and Finland across different stages of curriculum implementation?
2. What are the differences of kindergarten teachers' perceptions on their curriculum autonomy in China and Finland across different stages of curriculum implementation?

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Research design**

This study adopted a qualitative comparative study approach to examine how kindergarten teachers in Finland and China experience curriculum autonomy across different stages of curriculum implementation. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' perspectives within their specific organizational and cultural contexts. The comparative lens helped identify country-specific features and offered a more nuanced understanding of the kindergarten teaching profession from an international perspective. The study drew on Bereday's four-stage model of comparative research: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison (Adick, 2017).

### **4.2 Participants**

A total of 10 kindergarten teachers participated in the study, five from China and five from Finland. Participants were selected based on two criteria: having at least two years of professional experience in early childhood education and being representative of their local educational contexts. The Chinese teachers all worked in public kindergartens in a "new first-tier" city in Southwest China. The Finnish teachers were from private kindergartens in Helsinki. It is important to note that in Finland, private and public kindergartens follow the same regulations under municipal governance, and there are minimal quality differences between them.

Due to resource limitations, participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Two main channels were used: online teacher communities (including the researcher's former colleagues and classmates) for recruiting Chinese participants, and kindergarten institutions with established cooperation with the University of Helsinki for recruiting Finnish participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily. The ten teachers were anonymized as T1 to T10.

Table 1. Participants

Participants	Teaching Years	Age Group	Gender	Educational Background	Nationality
T1	4	3-6	Female	Bachelor's Degree	China
T2	9	1-5	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Finland
T3	8.5	3-6	Female	Associate Degree	China
T4	4	3-6	Female	Associate Degree	China
T5	6.5	1-5	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Finland
T6	4.5	2-3	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Finland
T7	2.5	3-5	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Finland
T8	6	3-6	Female	Bachelor's Degree	China
T9	7	3-6	Female	Bachelor's Degree	China
T10	2.5	1-3	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Finland

\*Note: Associate degree means a three-year college degree that student-teachers can obtain from a college.

### 4.3 Instruments and procedures

Curriculum autonomy involves various forms of operation, teachers may experience similar degrees of curriculum autonomy through different processes. For this reason, semi-structured in-depth interviews (see Appendix 1 for protocol) were chosen to collect teachers' narratives about their professional knowledge and experiences. The interview structure was informed by the autonomy framework proposed by Wermke & Salokangas (2021), as well as previous interview instruments on teacher autonomy (Erss et al., 2016; Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022). Discussions with the supervisor and two pilot interviews—conducted in both Chinese and English—were used to test the effectiveness of the protocol design and refine the questions accordingly.

Formal interviews were conducted online in either Chinese or English, each lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were carried out between the 26th of October and the 7th of January. Prior to each interview, participants were briefed on the structure. With their consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed for analysis.

## 4.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis is employed in this study by using ATLAS.ti. When analyzing perspectives from different participants, thematic analysis helps identify both commonalities and differences, uncover unexpected insights, and generate a well-structured and coherent report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). During the translation and interpretation of key excerpts in both Chinese and English, particular attention was paid to conceptual equivalence. The coding of Chinese-language data was conducted bilingually. The analysis combined both deductive and inductive approaches and was carried out in three phases:

Phase 1: Generating Initial Codes, Categories and Themes. Based on the theoretical framework and prior research, predefined themes, categories, and codes were developed deductively in a codebook (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.44-46), which provided analytical direction when working with a large volume of data. At the same time, new codes were generated inductively through reading of the data and guided by the research questions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase 2: Refining Codes and Categories. Throughout the iterative coding process, unnecessary codes were removed, while existing ones merged or redefined. Categories were also refined to maintain coherence with codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 3: Reviewing and Refining Themes. After multiple readings of the interview transcripts, meaningful units were identified, categorized, and refined into conceptual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This process ensured that the clustered themes accurately reflected the original data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and corresponded to different stages of curriculum implementation: curriculum and instructional design, curriculum activity organization, evaluation on curriculum implementation (see Tables 2–4).

Table 2. Theme: Curriculum and Instructional Design

Categories	Codes	Description	Examples of data excerpts
Teaching planning	Sources for planning	The sources or materials teachers use when developing their teaching plans, such as national core curriculum, local curriculum, or institutional templates.	Because we have a programme based on the KEG, five days a week, we have to arrange the curriculum according to the five domains for the age of the children, and then make sure that all five domains are covered every week. (T3)
	Decision-making in planning	Decision-making in the planning process, including who decides the theme, rhythm and structure of the teaching plan.	Everyone who works in the groups at this daycare are involved in creating the group specific one(plan) and the one for this daycare. So then we usually have a planning day, a meeting together where we bring up things... and then someone if it's us together or if it's the boss writes down the ready plan, the ready curriculum. (T7)
	Modification of plans	The adjustments teachers make for teaching themes, content sequence, and pacing on a semesterly, monthly, weekly, or daily basis.	We change our plans all the time. I always learned that you have to have a plan A. And if plan A doesn't work, you have to have plan B and plan C and plan D.....With the children's interest if it's not like working the way I planned it then I have to change it around to suit the children. (T2)
Teaching content	Selection of content	Teachers select teaching content, including whether the content is prescribed by curriculum documents, or autonomously chosen by the teacher based on children's needs and interests.	(The prescribed textbook) It's supplementary, offering many suggested activities you can freely choose from. It's quite developed, with complete thematic frameworks. We don't use it entirely, just parts of it. We also combine it with content from another one we currently use. The angles or focuses can vary, but you must adhere to the overarching framework provided. (T4)
	Adjustment of content	How teaching content is modified by teachers during or after planning, including real-time adjustments based on classroom dynamics, individual children's responses, or administrative appointments.	I think that's quite up to the teachers...I wanted to work with teaching the kids more animal names because I noticed that they didn't have a big vocabulary for animals but they were very interested in playing with the animal toys. (T7)

Categories	Codes	Description	Examples of data excerpts
Teaching methods and materials	Selection of methods and materials	Teachers select teaching methods and materials, including the role of organizational resources, and consideration of children's needs, interests, or developmental levels.	When choosing materials, I usually consider my own conditions and the materials I already have... Generally, I design my teaching materials based on what's already available, and of course, I'll also think about whether these materials are attractive or interesting to children. (T8)
	Adjustment of methods and materials	How and why teachers adjust their chosen methods and materials, such as in response to classroom interactions, time constraints, children's engagement levels, or after self-reflection or feedback from colleagues.	It's still based on the feedback I get from the kids after teaching a few lessons... for example, in today's class... around two-thirds of the children were engaged in the activity... most of the kids met one of my lesson objectives, so I think the materials suited them well... (T3)
Assessment of children	Daily observations	Teachers' continuous, informal observations of children's behavior, interaction, learning progress, and emotional states during daily activities.	If a child has some issues this morning or recently, we'll immediately discuss and decide if the class teacher or other teachers should talk to the parents. It's not about listing all the child's shortcomings or issues, but rather understanding the child's recent status in class or kindergarten. There's no fixed time for evaluating children. (T1)
	Team discussion on child development	Regular group discussions among teachers about children's development, aiming to reach a collective understanding and adjust curriculum strategies accordingly.	Every week in the class meeting we discuss which children have recently improved in which areas, or for the issues we discussed before, whether they've improved or regressed, how we've addressed it, whether we should stick with our approach next week, analyze the reasons behind their progress or setbacks, and make adjustments for the following week this way. (T1)

Table 3. Theme: Curriculum Activity Organization

Categories	Codes	Description	Examples of data excerpts
Collegial collaboration	Collaborative decision-making	How curriculum-related decisions, such as activity planning, content selection, and assessment approaches are made collectively by teachers through meetings, negotiations, or shared responsibilities.	In other teams when we have been multiple teachers, we have been able to divide the responsibility so that we several have the same responsibility. (T6)
	Distribution of Leadership	How leadership roles or responsibilities are distributed among colleagues, either formally appointed or informally agreed upon within the team.	I am the classroom teacher then I am the administrator of the class, I have to manage the class well, so I have to clarify some duties and points of the class with the two teachers in the class... They are able to deputize the class smoothly when I'm not in the class. (T3)
School discipline	Institutional regulations	The explicit, officially stated rules and policies that regulate teachers' behavior in the school setting, typically outlined in school documents or discussed in staff meetings.	During children's free playtime, teachers don't need to organize activities but must clearly define their positions. Play areas in kindergartens are divided between bedrooms and classrooms, with some blind spots, so teachers must be clear about where to stand. (T3)
	Implicit norms	The informal, unspoken behavioral expectations that shape classroom or school culture, such as how teachers are expected to interact with children in activities.	Right now, everyone is just maintaining a safe environment because the safety regulations are strict. I think, in the name of safety, there are certain activities we've all agreed to do a certain way... (T1)

Table 4. Theme: Evaluation on Curriculum Implementation

Categories	Codes	Description	Examples of data excerpts
Subjects of Evaluation	Administrative supervision	Evaluation conducted by school administrators or internal supervisors, such as the principal or pedagogical coordinator, who observe, assess, or provide feedback on teachers' curriculum implementation.	In addition to the requirements for the developmental goals of the children... there are also directives issued by the education bureau... (If there are times when our activities do not meet these requirements or are not appropriate for the age group of the children, they will adjust the teachers back in time... to bring the teacher's mind back to the track. (T3)
	Municipal evaluation	Evaluation initiated or conducted by municipal-level education authorities, which may include standard inspections, curriculum audits, or performance reviews at the system level.	I think that last year the city of Helsinki sent us a message that we need to be more specific than we were. So then we adjusted some changes and then this year I think they've accepted it. (T6)
	Peer evaluation	Evaluation made by fellow teachers or colleagues, often through mutual observation, joint reflection, or team-based feedback on each other's curriculum implementation.	At the end of each semester, we summarize all semester activities and children's development from start to finish. All teachers in the kindergarten gather to review and collectively evaluate the entire process, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. Teachers suggest how the next teacher conducting a similar activity might improve. (T4)
Evaluation criteria	Administrative formats	The predefined administrative formats, forms, or checklists used in the evaluation process, which standardize what aspects of curriculum implementation are assessed and how.	During morning exercise observations, ABC scores are used... Later, we'll discuss and summarize (the morning exercise) together. They'll evaluate what you did well and provide suggestions for improvement or better practices... we'll go through each of these points (from the ABC scores). (T9)
	Policy-based evaluation standards	The evaluation standards that are directly derived from national or municipal curriculum guidelines or policy documents, often used as normative benchmarks to assess whether teachers' implementation aligns with official expectations.	For instance, when conducting an activity... If the child can jump 3 meters or 5 meters, matching the guideline, then they've reached this developmental goal, meaning the lesson's objective was achieved. (T9)

## **4.5 Ethical consideration**

All participants received written and verbal information (see Appendix 2) about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature, and provided informed consent before the interviews. No identifying information was included in the data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. During the interviews, special care was taken to minimize emotional discomfort, especially when discussing professional tensions or constraints. Prior to recruiting participants in Finland, the head of daycare was approached for initial permission to approach the teaching staff. Chinese teachers were contacted on a personal basis, as the interviews focused on individual perspectives and did not involve organizational information or publicity.

## **5 Research results and their interpretation**

This section presents and analyzes the findings to address the research question: “What are kindergarten teachers’ perceptions on their curriculum autonomy in China and Finland across different stages of curriculum implementation?” The analysis below clarifies how teachers’ curriculum autonomy manifests in practice.

### **5.1 Similarities between Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers’ curriculum autonomy**

Based on interview data from ten kindergarten teachers in Finland and China, this study finds that teachers in both countries experience similar policy guidance regarding curriculum planning. Furthermore, child-centered values and organizational factors—such as working rhythms—emerge as crucial elements shaping teachers’ perceptions of curriculum autonomy.

#### **5.1.1 The guiding roles of policy documents, child-centered educational values, and organizational culture in curriculum and instructional design**

##### *Influences of policy documents and organizational routines on teaching planning*

Teachers from both countries showed a clear policy-oriented approach in curriculum planning. National educational authorities do not provide detailed, standardized regulations regarding teaching content or methods. Instead, teachers base their planning on general curriculum frameworks or guiding documents. Specifically, Chinese kindergarten teachers frequently mentioned national guidelines such as the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (KEG) (for trial implementation) and the Early Learning and Development Guidelines (ELDG) for Children aged 3 to 6. These documents offer broad directions and thematic categories but do not prescribe detailed implementation. The descriptions typically outline overall developmental goals and balanced growth directions for specific age groups, while leaving specific teaching methods and implementation strategies to teachers’ discretion, depending on their own contexts. Teachers’ actual tasks involve autonomously developing detailed teaching plans based on

developmental goals within five major domains, organized by semester, month, or even weekly.

“For example, our outdoor activities and group teaching sessions need to be organised by the teacher. Because we have a programme based on the KEG, five days a week, we have to arrange the curriculum according to the five domains for the age of the children, and then make sure that all five domains are covered every week.” (T3)

In certain specific educational stages, such as the preschool-primary transition courses emphasized in senior kindergarten classes, policy guidance remains directional rather than providing detailed instructional regulations or explicit operational guidelines. Teachers still rely on their own interpretations and judgments to translate policy objectives into practical teaching plans.

“When it comes to the senior class, because now the government places greater emphasis on the transition from kindergarten to primary school, but there isn’t a specific curriculum for this transition period. There’s only a national guideline stating that we should pay attention to a few aspects during this transition, but they’re just some guiding points, and can’t really be called a curriculum.” (T1)

In Finland’s early childhood education system, teachers follow the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Finnish ECEC NCC), but they also receive additional guidance from local municipal curriculum documents. When designing the overall educational plans for schools and the specific plans for each class, teachers actively reference these localized curriculum guidelines. Such municipal-level policies not only specify the national curriculum but also offer teachers professional insights for incorporating local cultural contexts into their curriculum design.

“The national curriculum I think is the main one. And then they also have made a separate one for daycares in Helsinki which are supposed to work towards if the different cities have set up a different goal...So that is still all the same things but then the Helsinki specific ones also added into it.” (T7)

“I think it’s quite good now. How we have it that we got the broad, and then we narrow it down... if you live in Helsinki then it's like more you need to know different things than if you live in Lapland...because they have a lot of nature...and then you can take those things and develop them from like a Helsinki point of view and then we work with...sustainability...in city how do you do things and that's a difference from if you do if the child lives in Lapland...” (T2)

Teachers from both countries frequently encounter disruptions and challenges when creating and implementing teaching plans. During interviews, teachers mentioned that their preparation and teaching time is often significantly reduced due to unexpected meetings, rearranged group activities, or unforeseen incidents. These practical interruptions make it difficult to carry out their planned activities smoothly.

“I think maybe it’s because something suddenly comes up in kindergarten... like some events or activities, and the things I planned to do get interrupted... For example, this afternoon I planned to observe a project activity, to see if the kids had solved some of their previous problems, but suddenly there was a meeting. Then I had to leave and missed it.” (T8)

“...like we have talked about these individual plans every week with the team, but so far we haven’t had time, that much time to do it...I find it like difficult, especially if it’s some activity that we also need to plan for and prepare for...So I feel like if I’m planning an activity, then I don’t have time to open up the child’s document and read that. ” (T7)

Although the seemingly broad national and local curriculum frameworks permit personalized teaching decisions, they always define the overall scope of teachers’ instructional plans, implicitly requiring self-regulation and adjustment. Teachers from both countries reported regularly reflecting on whether their designs align with curriculum standards, continuously adjusting their plans as needed.

“Actually, the habit of tidying up toys should be formed as early as in the junior class...But we paid too much attention to individual children’s daily routines and overlooked the routine-building of other kids. And even we teachers didn’t realize that this was something important that should be treated as a curriculum.” (T1)

“I use everything and then like from the guidelines and then I do it in like theory in practice and then go back and forth through this... And then you always like review is it review but you go reflect on it assess and then you do something again what’s working, what’s not working?” (T2)

Therefore, teachers’ actual instructional planning is rarely a purely independent choice; rather, it is a form of controlled autonomy within policy frameworks, involving ongoing negotiation and adaptation between personalized decisions and policy guidance.

### *Child-centered observations as a basis for adapting teaching content*

When determining the specific content of teaching activities, kindergarten teachers in both countries prioritize children's interests and developmental needs, reflecting shared professional beliefs and educational values. In practice, teachers first consider children's curiosity and willingness to explore, along with developmental characteristics specific to their age group, ensuring that selected teaching activities effectively meet children's needs.

“(What determines your teaching content, materials, and methods?) Teaching content partly comes from daily life. For example, when a child suddenly becomes interested in a particular topic, we'll choose it for teaching. And we also rely on the guidelines, like the senior class children need to learn number decomposition within ten, so we choose that topic. And you still need to maintain balance among the five learning areas throughout the week. That's basically how we decide.” (T8)

“That is quite often it is based on what the kids are interested in learning or what they are interested in, in playing. A lot of the educational topics are awesome. We sort of explore them through play. So playing is a big part every day. And then also through what the children are playing already. Then we observe and discuss with them what they are interested in knowing more of.” (T7)

During the interviews, teachers from both countries emphasized their commitment to a child-centered perspective, viewing children as active learners rather than passive recipients. Such choices of teaching content are guided by teachers' professional judgment, highlighting children's development as the core educational objective.

### *Influences of child-centered values and organizational resources on teaching methods and materials*

Teachers from both China and Finland mentioned that when selecting and applying teaching methods and materials, they typically match them closely with their pre-designed teaching plans and content to maintain coherence and effectiveness. At the same time, teachers consistently emphasized that these choices are never fixed; they continuously adjust their strategies based on observations and feedback from children's actual performance in kindergarten activities.

“Firstly, we reflect on whether the play materials provided for the children are suitable for them, whether there are too few or too monotonous, or if they’re too simple for them, and then teachers in the class will discuss it. Secondly, why can’t they engage well, is it because they lack experience with such play? Or they have no relevant experience? Or they simply don’t understand the play...Thirdly, we still need to listen to what the children are discussing. Because some children have rich experience, while some others don’t. So we(l) make adjustments according to the characteristics of the age group I’m teaching.” (T3)

“We started out observing the children’s needs and their interests in the group. And then we quite quickly noticed that they have a big interest in building activities. So then we tried to take out more toys and create more activities that train these skills.” (T7)

However, ideal teaching decisions cannot always be smoothly implemented. Teachers commonly expressed in interviews that real-world constraints significantly limit their ideal professional practices. Tight schedules often leave insufficient time to prepare richer and more diverse teaching materials. Additionally, limited resources and funding within kindergartens directly restrict the diversity and innovation in their choice of materials. Under these circumstances, teachers must demonstrate a high degree of professional adaptability and creativity. They actively seek alternative ways to achieve teaching goals, such as preparing detailed backup plans in advance. These measures allow teachers to flexibly adjust their strategies and ensure smooth teaching activities when encountering shortages or disruptions.

“When choosing materials, I usually consider my own conditions and the materials I already have... Generally, I design my teaching materials based on what’s already available, and of course, I’ll also think about whether these materials are attractive or interesting to children.” (T8)

“When I think materials, it’s always like you would want to change, but there’s a limit to what you can change like within the rooms and furniture and stuff like this, but you have to work with what you have.... you get used to it...sometimes to just have more energy to plan more.” (T10)

Objective limitations inevitably narrow the space for idealized teaching practices, compelling teachers to compromise and constantly balance between their ideal and reality. The need to exercise professional adaptability and initiative clearly underscores teachers’ central role in instructional decision-making.

### *Child-centered longitudinal daily observation as the primary mode of assessment*

Kindergarten teachers in both China and Finland emphasize child-centered assessment practices, focusing primarily on the individual child's natural development. Teachers generally adopt personalized, one-to-one methods for longitudinal evaluation rather than relying on standardized forms or comparative tests. Specifically, Chinese teachers usually conduct comprehensive individual reviews during regular class meetings or end-of-term summaries, with approaches based on their long-term, continuous observations of each child.

“We don't have specific mid-term evaluations for children. Evaluations are embedded in daily observations or weekly class meetings. For example, if a child has some issues this morning or recently, teachers immediately discuss and decide if the class teacher or other teachers should talk to the parents. It's not about listing all the child's shortcomings or issues, but rather understanding the child's recent status in class or kindergarten. There's no fixed time for evaluating children.” (T1)

Finnish teachers evaluate children's development through systematic observation and analysis of daily behavior, actively integrating these findings into Individual Development Plans (IDP) and communicating children's progress with parents.

“And assessment, because now it's been mostly a document that you take out when you have the meetings with the parents. But then it should also be at all throughout the year to check the work that we are doing with the children. So that is something that I want to do more to go back to the individual plan for every child and see how the methods work, are working and like evaluate if there's a new goal that needs to be made for the child or if there are new methods that need to be tried, or if things are seemingly smooth.” (T7)

In terms of specific assessment content, teachers from both countries focus on transferable skills such as children's social abilities and emotional regulation. Such an assessment approach requires teachers to possess acute observational skills and professional judgment to transform daily observations into evaluations.

“(Is this assessment formative or summative?) It's formative. But at the end of the term, we don't produce any formal evaluation reports or documents. Teachers discuss periodically if we notice a child has developed inappropriate ways of interacting with peers or if there are specific areas we need to focus on. We adjust

our approaches accordingly, observing and guiding the child. Then, after a while, we check if there's improvement." (T3)

"They need to develop normally...is it something in the social skills they don't know how to go with to play with others...that's something we have to work on now with this child...That's kind of assessment we do." (T2)

This personalized evaluation method demands teachers leverage their professional expertise, psychology knowledge, and even emotional support capabilities. Although teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in this process, it also presents significant challenges to their professional competence and ethical awareness.

### **5.1.2 Collaborative decision-making serves as the primary approach to organizing curriculum activities**

Kindergarten teachers in both countries clearly demonstrate collegial cooperation in organizing daily activities. They tend to use collegial decision-making methods for activities organization to better accommodate the practical demands of full-day pedagogy and address dynamic changes and uncertainties in actual teaching practice. During instruction, teachers often establish collective agreements through discussion and negotiation, ensuring coherence and consistency within curriculum activities.

"But otherwise, we plan as a team. We plan how the room looks so it's good for the children and how we want each of our how we see the daily work, how it should be. So we come together as a team and discuss our own visions so we can make it doesn't change that much during the day or with the teachers." (T10)

This collaborative decision-making approach reflects teachers' recognition of collective wisdom. However, if a teacher deviates from previously agreed-upon decisions or makes individual adjustments, the class's overall plan and consistency can be disrupted. Thus, teacher autonomy in this context is not simply about individual decision-making; rather, it is built upon mutual trust and commitment among team members.

"We discuss with children things like, 'We collected the toys, but the trays are still messy; toys often get lost or misplaced.' Every day, after the play, we summarize and review if each toy was properly put away according to our agreement. If even

one teacher slacks off or overlooks a toy, all previous efforts are wasted. Our attitude towards tidying reflects the class culture and attitude.” (T1)

When facing difficult decisions or multiple viable options, teachers prefer collaborative discussions to reach final decisions. Such cooperation helps reduce the pressure and responsibility associated with individual decision-making and promotes diversity and inclusiveness in the outcomes, illustrates the social and interactive dimensions of teacher curriculum autonomy, suggesting that teachers' decision-making freedom is influenced not only by their professional judgment but also by relational dynamics and interactions within the teaching team.

### **5.1.3 Evaluation on teachers' curriculum implementation**

The examination of evaluation mechanisms for teachers' curriculum implementation in Finland and China revealed few similarities. Instead, numerous differences emerged, which will be discussed in the following section of this study.

## **5.2 Differences between Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers' curriculum autonomy**

Although both Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers demonstrated a certain degree of autonomy in curriculum implementation, there were marked differences in the specific ways and extent to which they achieved curriculum autonomy, according to the teachers' accounts. Compared to Finnish kindergarten teachers, Chinese kindergarten teachers were generally subjected to more detailed guidance and discipline in terms of instructional design and activities organization, and the purpose of the administrative internal supervision received was related to the quality of instruction presented to the public, rather than just the reorientation of instruction.

### **5.2.1 Curriculum and instructional design**

#### *Hierarchical decision-making vs. shared decision-making*

When it comes to school-level curriculum project and decision-making, Chinese kindergarten teachers generally lack direct input or even sufficient awareness of such decisions. This reflects a certain level of information asymmetry and

separation between individual teachers and organizational decision-making. Consequently, when classroom activities intersect with school-level projects, ambiguity in educational philosophy can occur, negatively impacting teachers' curriculum planning.

“(Does every kindergarten have its own curriculum plan?) Yes. I can't remember exactly... I just know the curriculum includes several parts, and each activity integrates these parts. At the time, a principal nearby mentioned this as 'top-level design,' something ordinary teachers usually are not able to fully grasp.” (T9)

Furthermore, hierarchical relationships significantly influence collaboration among Chinese kindergarten teachers. Classroom teachers typically assume a leading role, holding significant authority in teaching design and decisions. Other teachers' participation and autonomy depend largely on how classroom teachers distribute their responsibilities.

“The classroom teacher doesn't need to have their own ideas; their role is to clearly understand the class's current developmental goals and issues. We must focus and resolve these issues because the classroom teacher knows the class best... This person needs a holistic view to summarize and observe the dynamics and issues in the environment.” (T1)

The Finnish teachers interviewed indicated that school-level teaching plans are developed collaboratively by all teaching staff, characterized by transparency and a flat decision-making structure. Within this atmosphere of collective discussion and shared decision-making, every teacher has opportunities to express opinions and offer suggestions.

“It's not just one person's decision, like not the head teachers but every teacher in the daycare agree on good thing this year.” (T2)

“Everyone who works in the groups at this daycare are involved in creating the group specific one(plan) and the one for this daycare. So then we usually have a planning day, a meeting together where we bring up things... and then someone if it's us together or if it's the boss writes down the ready plan, the ready curriculum. But that is something that we all work on together first.” (T7)

Through respectful communication and negotiation, teachers reach comprehensive plans that integrate diverse perspectives. As a result, kindergarten-wide educational objectives, directions, and methods are coherent

and consistent, providing individual teachers with clear and reliable guidance for their own instructional planning.

*Prescribed learning materials and training vs. optional learning materials and counseling*

Prescribed textbooks can influence teachers' teaching planning, adding another layer of constraints beyond general curriculum guidelines provided by national or local educational authorities. Chinese teachers reported that their daily teaching practices are directly guided and sometimes restricted by these textbooks. Although textbooks offer convenient instructional references and, in some cases, clearly defined teaching objectives and content, they also limit teachers' creative and personalized decision-making.

“(How does the textbook help you plan activities?) It's supplementary, offering many suggested activities you can freely choose from. It's quite developed, with complete thematic frameworks. We don't use it entirely, just parts of it. We also combine it with content from another one we currently use. The angles or focuses can vary, but you must adhere to the overarching framework provided.” (T4)

Besides textbooks, school-organized workshops, seminars, and training sessions also directly or indirectly affect Chinese teachers' curriculum designs. Given that kindergartens practice full-day pedagogy, different teaching activities receive varying degrees of attention from educational administrators. For instance, group teaching activities usually follow a structured, standardized framework with specific time limits and prescribed methods, allowing administrative departments to provide clear guidance and examples. Chinese teachers must select from or moderately adapt these predefined structures. Thematic activities, covering broader content areas and spanning longer periods, require early identification of overall themes and directions. Administrative staff often provide guidance to clarify teaching objectives, thereby offering support but also somewhat restricting teacher autonomy. Chinese teachers typically engage in detailed design and implementation within frameworks agreed upon through collective discussion.

“For thematic activities like deciding what theme we'll carry out next semester, the administrative teachers lead discussions with our classroom teachers at the

end of the current semester. We talk about children's interests and topics they're discussing, then plan themes for the next semester based on the Guidelines, children's age characteristics, and interests. We outline a thematic framework, at first deciding what we'll say to children, what topics to introduce, and how children might respond." (T3)

In contrast, daily life-related activities differ significantly. These activities involve routines and habit formation that resist uniform classroom management, relying instead on spontaneous, interactive responses between teachers and children. This spontaneous nature grants teachers greater autonomy and flexibility, as training and administrative guidance have relatively limited influence. Chinese teachers rely heavily on professional judgment and experience to respond to children's immediate behaviors and needs, reflecting more personalized, context-specific teacher autonomy.

"For example, if you notice the class is messy when tidying up toys, or things fall down and kids don't know what to do, the teachers will discuss it with the children. I think we have quite a lot of autonomy here, because the higher-ups don't really pay much attention to these aspects, so we can make many decisions ourselves. But whenever something draws their attention, we lose that autonomy." (T9)

Overall, interventions from training and administrative guidance limit the scope of Chinese teachers' autonomous decisions to some extent, but they also alleviate uncertainty and decision-making burdens in teaching practice. Curriculum autonomy, therefore, is neither simply weakened nor enhanced but continually negotiated and balanced between external guidance and internal decision-making processes.

When Finnish teachers encounter practical difficulties or problems during curriculum design, they typically have autonomy in selecting resources or seeking appropriate solutions. Finnish teachers independently decide on teaching methods, activity content, and materials to best meet children's developmental needs and interests. Additionally, Finnish teachers may consult with special education experts within the kindergarten as needed. These experts offer recommendations without imposing mandatory guidelines or requirements, thus broadening teachers' perspectives while preserving their professional autonomy.

“...just also getting ideas from our coworkers and our special teachers and stuff like that to use as much as we can as well and try to be creative with the limited amount of materials that we have.” (T5)

“...special needs is something we need more help with because it’s not in our schooling...she(the special teacher) usually sits with us. We have weekly meetings with our team...and we can...talk together about ideas for the group...if we have something more difficult, we need to work on them...she wants us to think for ourselves...And then we talk a lot with the other teachers in the group and with the other personnel as well of tips and what they would do and like how they would handle some situations.” (T10)

This considerable curriculum autonomy largely originates from mutual trust and respect among colleagues and leadership regarding each other’s professional competencies. Recognition of Finnish teachers’ professional judgment and educational decisions varies across organizational contexts.

“...when I was working for another daycare, we sometimes got from our bosses guidelines that you have to use a certain material and stuff. But I think that in this daycare we have more freedom and our bosses trust us. And then if we need guidance, we can go ask them that, hello, I need help. What could I do? But we have more freedom at this daycare to use the material we think is suitable.” (T6)

The educational environment which is characterized by both top-down and bottom-up interactions, strengthening Finnish teachers’ confidence and initiative in autonomous decision-making, enabling them to manage complex educational challenges freely and flexibly.

### **5.2.2 Curriculum activity organization**

#### *Implicit safety culture as a constraint on event organization vs. process-oriented approaches to safety event handling*

From interviews with Chinese teachers, in organizing kindergarten activities, safety is always prioritized and serves as a fundamental precondition for all curriculum activities. While the strong emphasis on safety is necessary, it also restricts Chinese teachers’ decision-making, especially regarding outdoor activities and larger-scale indoor events aimed at children’s health and physical development. Chinese teachers must carefully assess activity venues and child-adult ratios to ensure safety, often leading them to modify or even cancel activities

based on continuous safety evaluations. This cautious decision-making can, in some cases, compel teachers to compromise their educational beliefs and child-centered ideals, abandoning more creative or developmental activities.

“During children’s free playtime, teachers don’t need to organize activities but must clearly define their positions. Play areas in kindergartens are divided between bedrooms and classrooms, with some blind spots, so teachers must be clear about where to stand. Teachers also constantly observe children’s play, ensuring safety and promptly intervening if conflicts arise.” (T3)

Under persistent tension between safety considerations and professional ideals, Chinese teachers have gradually formed a conservative, implicit consensus and internal culture. This culture tends to discourage innovative or potentially risky activities, favoring instead familiar, safe, and reliable options.

“I feel nowadays everyone just aims to stay safe because the safety standards are strict. Everyone agrees to limit certain activities for safety reasons, for instance, running games or competitive activities have become restricted in kindergartens.” (T1)

This safety-oriented conservatism reflects practical necessities in Chinese teachers’ professional practice, while also highlighting organizational and contextual challenges teachers face concerning professional decision-making. At the same time, Finnish teachers follow clearly defined procedures and organizational guidelines when addressing unexpected safety incidents involving children during teaching activities. When such incidents occur, teachers must document and complete detailed incident-report forms to ensure that handling is standardized, transparent, and traceable. The primary objective of this process is not to assign blame or punish individual teachers, but rather to analyze the causes of incidents and prevent similar occurrences in future teaching activities.

“(if teachers didn’t pay enough attention to kids and some accidents happened) we have to fill out forms...there’re guidelines how we need to act. And then after the accident has happened, we need to check that the same accident won’t happen again...there might be consequence that someone needs to come and observe that what’s going wrong if it happens like multiple times. But if there’s an accident that happens, we fill out the form and then we need to think about how we don’t make the same kind of accident happen again.” (T6)

This safety management approach treats safety incidents as inherent risks and challenges within educational practice, emphasizing professional reflection and systematic improvement rather than individual punishment or criticism. Teachers are expected to demonstrate professional judgment and caution during post-incident reflections, maintaining a rational balance between instructional activities and safety management.

### **5.2.3 Evaluation on curriculum implementation**

#### *Quality of implementation in administrative supervision courses vs. direction of implementation in municipal advisory courses*

Although formal and standardized assessment tools such as rating scales, score sheets, or exams are not widely used to evaluate teaching outcomes in kindergartens, the interview data clearly show that Chinese teachers' instructional design and activity organization are still subject to various forms of external evaluation. These evaluations mainly take the form of informal, verbal feedback and reviews, such as routine quality assessments conducted by kindergarten administrators and occasional evaluations by local education authorities or regional organizations. These seemingly informal evaluations effectively act as a continuous mechanism for controlling teaching practices.

Firstly, the curriculum framework itself serves as an implicit standard for assessing teaching quality. Even without explicit rating scales, kindergarten administrators develop their own evaluation criteria based on experience, using verbal evaluations to determine whether teachers' instructional activities meet curriculum expectations.

“(Is your work ever evaluated?) Yes, like morning exercise observations scored as A, B, or C, followed by group discussions. We discuss strengths and areas needing improvement, giving suggestions each time.” (T8)

Group teaching sessions, thematic activities, and school-level programs often become focal points of administrative evaluations, as children's performance in these activities is viewed as a direct reflection of teaching quality. Consequently,

Chinese teachers face clearly defined quality expectations and evaluation criteria during the organization of these activities. At the end of each semester, Chinese teachers participate in group evaluation and reflection meetings organized within the kindergarten, where peer evaluations facilitate professional growth and mutual learning. However, such collective evaluations also highlight how professional decisions are constrained by collective norms.

“(Do you feel evaluated when conducting thematic or other teaching activities?)  
Yes. At the end of each semester, we summarize all semester activities and children’s development from start to finish. All teachers in the kindergarten gather to review and collectively evaluate the entire process, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. Teachers suggest how the next teacher conducting a similar activity might improve. It’s like a collective evaluation by all kindergarten teachers.” (T4)

It is important to note the potential discrepancy between administrators’ and frontline teachers’ understandings of activity standards and child-centered principles. Chinese teachers often have deeper knowledge of their own classrooms and children’s experiences. When administrative perceptions conflict with teachers’ educational beliefs, teachers may insist on their professional judgments.

“Everyone has different viewpoints and perspectives. Administrators might not fully understand the actual situation since they aren’t directly involved. Their suggestions might not always seem helpful to me, so teachers only summarize what they find useful and ignore the rest.” (T4)

Nevertheless, most of time, these professional tensions often lead Chinese teachers to compromise in their instructional planning. A key reason behind such compromise is that, although formal assessments like test scores are not employed in kindergartens, visually demonstrable teaching outcomes such as artistic classroom displays, publicity articles, and open-house events, which play a significant evaluative role. These displays directly affect the kindergarten’s public image and social reputation, placing administrative personnel as well as teachers under public accountability pressures. Consequently, these informal outcome evaluations significantly influence teachers’ instructional decisions, encouraging them to align closely with administrative preferences, particularly in activities associated with the kindergarten’s external image.

“(Do the requirements and standards in thematic activities come from both child-centered and external expectations?) Yes. Administrative requirements may be more oriented to the developmental characteristics of the children, including directives from education authorities. They may be more diversified for the teachers to carry out some of the activities. Sometimes activities might deviate from requirements or become unsuitable for children’s ages, so adjustments are made promptly. Teachers’ focus can be a little bit off, requiring administrators to redirect them.” (T3)

This informal, implicit evaluation mechanism, on one hand, offers teachers some flexibility and personalization, avoiding overly rigid or standardized assessments. On the other hand, it invisibly reduces professional autonomy, compelling Chinese teachers to continually negotiate and compromise between their personal educational values and organizational expectations.

On the contrary, Finnish teachers experience periodical inspections and feedback from municipal authorities in their daily teaching practice. However, the focus of these inspections is not on specific activities or classroom practices but rather on ensuring that teachers’ teaching plans align with national and local curriculum frameworks.

“if there is some sort of quality assessment of the daycare, then I mean that would be a time to check that the curriculum is being followed(or not)...one thing that we do have to sort of prove to the city of Helsinki...we need to write these goals for the daycare and the goals for every group...send them so that they see that we are working on something and the reasons why we are working on these things. So I think that is... the only thing that they actually check what we are doing. But I think that. I like that it is quite free and open...You need to check that there is something going on at every daycare like that they are following the curriculum.” (T7)

Municipal feedback is typically gentle and constructive rather than intrusive or critical of Finnish teachers’ professional decisions, aiming primarily to enhance overall planning quality and implementation. Such administrative feedback largely respects teachers’ professionalism, emphasizing supportive professional interactions that help teachers optimize their teaching practices.

“(Have you received some feedback on your plan?) I think that last year the city of Helsinki sent us a message that we need to be more specific than we were. So then we adjusted some changes and then this year I think they’ve accepted it. We haven’t gotten any feedback that it was wrong or anything.” (T6)

Internal administrative evaluations within kindergartens reflect a similar style, characterized by encouragement and suggestions. Administrators adopt a consultative approach, offering guidance to help teachers identify and resolve issues in instructional designs, rather than issuing authoritative instructions or criticism on how teaching should be conducted. Finnish teachers highly value and accept this evaluation and feedback approach, believing their professional competence enables them to make appropriate educational judgments without overly assertive instructions or detailed directives from external authorities.

“The fact that we have open discussions with our superiors as well...And she doesn't have to come in and give us that many ideas. She can give us ideas like you have this idea of maybe you could implement this as well, but it's not a must. It's just an idea...I feel like the things that I do as a teacher, I have a fairly solid base on why I'm doing it and I can explain why I do things in a specific way. So pretty much there hasn't been that much evaluation or like need for someone to come reprimanded.” (T5)

This municipal and administrative evaluation approach maintains curriculum standards and teaching quality while fully respecting and protecting teacher autonomy, providing a highly supportive model of external oversight.

### **5.3 Summary of the findings**

In this section, the main findings of the study are presented. By comparing Finnish and Chinese kindergarten teachers' perceptions of curriculum autonomy, key similarities and differences across the stages of curriculum implementation were identified.

Across the three stages of curriculum implementation, the main similarities were found in curriculum design and activity organization. These were reflected in the guiding role of curriculum policy documents, the shared emphasis on child-centered educational values, and the collegial approach to decision-making in organizing activities. In contrast, no similarity was observed in the stage of curriculum evaluation.

Differences emerged at each stage of curriculum implementation. Organizational culture was identified as a key factor shaping teachers' curriculum autonomy, particularly in curriculum design and activity organization. In these areas, the structure of organizational management and the nature of educational training influenced the extent to which teachers could make autonomous decisions. For Chinese teachers, implicit safety norms and internal administrative monitoring related to curriculum quality tended to restrict their autonomy. In contrast, Finnish teachers were more likely to follow standardized, process-oriented safety protocols and curriculum implementation guidelines, which allowed for greater consistency while preserving professional discretion.

## **6 Validity**

### **6.1 Credibility**

To enhance the credibility of the study, all interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' own expressions and experiences. An inductive coding and categorization approach was used, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by prior assumptions. Representative quotes were included to support interpretations, with attention to the cultural and organizational contexts of each participant. However, due to the use of a third language in interviews with Finnish participants, some responses may have lacked full fluency or nuance. The researcher drew on personal teaching experience and knowledge of teacher discourse to observe and interpret participants' expressions and body language, helping to guide the discussion and deepen thematic development during interviews.

### **6.2 Transferability**

This study involved a small sample of kindergarten teachers from two countries, all working in economically developed urban areas and teaching similar age groups (2–5 years). Participants had varying levels of experience, ranging from 2.5 to 9 years, and relatively similar educational backgrounds. While regional policy and cultural factors may limit the generalizability of the findings, the shared patterns of professional culture identified in early childhood education may offer valuable insights, particularly for education systems facing similar challenges in balancing teacher autonomy with accountability.

### **6.3 Dependability**

To ensure dependability, the research process was systematically documented, including the development of the research protocol, information letter, data collection procedures, transcription, and each stage of inductive content analysis. This allows readers to trace how findings were derived from the raw data. While

the steps taken cannot guarantee replicable results, the transparency of methodological choices and analytical reasoning contributes to internal coherence.

## **6.4 Confirmability**

Throughout the study, the researcher maintained a reflective stance to reduce potential bias. With academic exposure to both Chinese and Finnish education systems and cross-cultural experience, particular care was taken during data analysis to ensure conceptual consistency across cultural contexts, and to clearly distinguish between description and interpretation in the reporting of results. However, the existing relationship between the researcher and some Chinese participants may have influenced the data, as familiarity and language fluency may have encouraged more open or nuanced expression. The researcher's prior exposure to related research may also have shaped aspects of the analysis.

## **7 Discussion**

This study explored how kindergarten teachers in China and Finland perceive their autonomy in curriculum implementation. The findings indicate that while the overall structure of curriculum autonomy is similar across both contexts, differences in specific practices and experiences largely result from professional cultures and organizational management models.

### **7.1 Curriculum autonomy across curriculum implementation stages**

Regarding the research question, Finnish teachers exhibit substantial autonomy in curriculum design and activity organization, experiencing minimal external evaluation and supervision on curriculum implementation. In contrast, Chinese teachers exercise partial autonomy in these same areas but face more frequent evaluative supervision from within their organizations.

Firstly, teachers' curriculum autonomy in both countries share similarities in the relationship with curriculum policies. Within the context of early childhood education, the child-centered curriculum approach grants teachers considerable flexibility to address children's diverse developmental needs (Kahila et al., 2020). Teachers in both countries value the scientific guidance provided by national core curriculum guidelines, acknowledging that clearly defined developmental goals help them to position their instructional activities accurately. This finding echoes the work of Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p. 8).

According to Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.8), the policy control surrounding teacher curriculum autonomy can be understood through the distinction between input governance and output governance. Input governance emphasizes standardized resource allocation and instructional processes to ensure that all schools and teachers operate within the same framework. This typically involves strict curriculum guidelines and reduced variation in content across institutions and teachers. Although the entry requirements for the teaching profession may be high in such systems, external oversight during teachers' careers tends to be

limited. In contrast, output governance focuses more on student learning outcomes rather than teaching processes.

From this perspective, both China and Finland follow a loose input-oriented model in early childhood curriculum governance. The emphasis on children's holistic development replaces a focus on measurable learning outcomes, and curriculum control is primarily aimed at regulating teaching processes rather than directly assessing results.

Secondly, Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.69) argue that classroom-level decision-making is the dimension in which teachers feel the strongest sense of professional ownership. This study also confirms that both Chinese and Finnish teachers recognize their key role in educational decision-making within the classroom. Although Chinese curriculum policies are more detailed than those in Finland such as specifying developmental goals for each age group, teachers regard the language used in guidelines such as the ELDG as suggestive rather than prescriptive, serving as reference points for complex teaching situations without significantly restricting their practical autonomy. Instead, Chinese teachers' autonomy in curriculum and instructional design is primarily constrained by teaching materials or guides prescribed by educational institutions. When required to follow specific teaching plans outlined in textbooks, teachers' decision-making space is narrowed down to micro-level adjustments, such as choosing specific teaching methods or instructional materials.

Moreover, teachers from both countries demonstrate high levels of autonomy in assessing children's development during curriculum and instructional design stage, which closely aligns with child-centered educational philosophy. Given that children's development follows a spiral progression and educational effects tend to be delayed, teachers' individualized daily observations and interactions become central to the assessment process. Professional judgment and emotional logic are indispensable, while standardized assessment methods are considered incompatible with the core curriculum philosophy. Consequently, teachers are relatively free to exercise professional judgment in assessing children's developmental progress.

Thirdly, when teachers are required to translate policy documents into concrete classroom-level and school-level teaching plans, the role of the kindergarten organization as an intermediary in interpreting and guiding policy is both reasonable and necessary. Effective curriculum implementation depends heavily on teachers' understanding and acceptance of the curriculum. When teachers lack sufficient professional knowledge or capacity for pedagogical reflection, excessive discretionary power may lead to inconsistencies in teaching quality or failure to achieve curricular objectives (Birbili & Myrovali, 2019). In Finland, teachers enjoy broader professional decision-making space largely due to the strong mutual trust between educators and their institutions regarding teachers' professionalism, as well as a shared belief in their ability to fit into the curriculum. This culture of professional trust within educational organizations is closely linked to the academically rigorous nature of Finnish teacher education.

Finnish teacher education emphasizes integration with higher education and a research-based approach. Kindergarten teachers in Finland are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree. Their training focuses on autonomous learning, critical thinking, and curriculum development, ensuring that teachers possess solid disciplinary knowledge as well as educational research competencies (Furuhagen et al., 2019). As a result, Finnish teachers earn a high level of trust from the government and are well-positioned to operate within Finland's decentralized educational governance model (Malinen et al., 2012).

In contrast, higher education coverage in early childhood teacher education remains relatively low in China, where associate and bachelor's degree programs still coexist as the main training pathways (Zhu, 2008). Although recent reforms in China have begun to emphasize prospective teachers' child-centered perspectives and educational research abilities (Wang, 2015; Jiang et al., 2021), the outcomes of such reforms remain to be fully realized. Additionally, Chinese early childhood teacher education continues to reflect a strong tendency toward "idealized teacher formation," emphasizing comprehensive development. Teachers are expected not only to master theoretical and research knowledge but also to be skilled in both teaching and management. However, in practice, this comprehensive and idealistic training model often results in teachers

becoming passive implementers of tasks, constantly striving for higher-level professional competencies and a more “perfect” professional identity (Peng & Liu, 2012; Qu, 2024).

## **7.2 Organizational and cultural influences on curriculum autonomy**

This study further reveals the combined influence of organizational factors, such as curriculum policies and evaluation mechanisms, and cultural factors, such as professional teaching culture, on teachers’ curriculum autonomy.

Although curriculum policies in both China and Finland reflect child-centered philosophies and, in theory, grant teachers greater autonomy, in actual practice, significant differences in internal evaluation mechanisms influence how autonomy is exercised. In Finland, assessments conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre(KARVI) are process-oriented. These assessments focus primarily on the extent to which teachers’ curriculum designs align with the national core curriculum. The primary aim is to support school development and promote curriculum standardization through constructive feedback, rather than to provide outcome-based public judgment (Simola et al., 2013). Additionally, the absence of a ranking culture in Finnish early childhood education further reduces pressure on teachers when making curriculum decisions.

In contrast, China’s Guidelines for the Quality Assessment of Kindergarten Childcare Education may, during implementation, indirectly increase teachers’ instructional pressure (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022). When kindergartens aim to improve educational quality, they often focus on reshaping teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and providing supporting materials to ensure compliance with curriculum policy standards. However, during this process, teachers often feel compelled to exceed basic requirements to meet not only national curriculum guidelines but also additional implicit expectations, such as local curriculum mandates or project-based activities.

Since children's developmental outcomes are often used as indicators of teaching quality, and because the standards for evaluating development are themselves ambiguous, teachers' innovative practices may be questioned during internal evaluations. This can again lead to what Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p.8) call an "autonomy paradox," whereby the more teachers strive to demonstrate autonomy, the more they experience self-imposed pressure, which in turn undermines their actual sense of professional freedom.

Despite this, Chinese teachers are still able to find areas of autonomy within organizational constraints. This is especially evident when teachers rely on their direct classroom experience to accurately assess children's interests and the dynamics of their groups. The child-centered philosophy enables teachers to reconstruct conventional instructional designs in practice. In this context, teachers tend to use their practical reasoning to justify their educational choices. This allows them to effectively balance curriculum implementation with external evaluation expectations.

In addition, the internal professional culture of organizations plays a significant role in shaping curriculum autonomy among teachers in both China and Finland. In both contexts, the autonomy exercised by teachers is primarily "collegial autonomy" rather than purely individual autonomy (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.170). Teachers' individual decision-making tends to focus on micro-level aspects, such as the selection of teaching methods and materials. This pattern is closely linked to the team-based teaching model commonly used in kindergartens, where curriculum implementation is managed through collective decision-making. Within such a collaborative model, autonomy is often influenced by both explicit and implicit organizational norms. Especially in organizational environments where the teaching role is increasingly bureaucratized, teachers tend to avoid risks and may voluntarily reduce their personal decision-making space (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p.170).

However, findings from this study suggest that in the kindergarten context, the practice of collegial autonomy can promote transparency in teachers' work and increase their participation in key organizational decisions. These include

contributions to the development of the annual school plan and the semester or monthly plans at the class level. Such involvement effectively expands teachers' curriculum autonomy and helps align team-teaching objectives. For Chinese teachers in particular, collegial autonomy serves as a strategic way to navigate external evaluations and diffuse accountability-related risks.

Both Chinese and Finnish teachers interviewed in this study referred to the leadership roles that they assume during curriculum implementation. Although administrative leadership typically resides with the head teacher, leadership during actual teaching activities often becomes distributed across different team members. The study found that when Chinese teachers lacked the ability to effectively exercise leadership within their teams, their collegial autonomy was often overshadowed by the authority of the school's administrative structure, weakening their individual curriculum autonomy. In contrast, interviews with Finnish teachers highlighted that a collaborative organizational culture plays a key role in supporting the exercise of leadership, enabling them to better adapt their roles and carry out teaching tasks more effectively within the framework of collegial autonomy (Kahila et al., 2020; Ahonen et al., 2023).

## 8 Conclusion and Implications

Adopting a cross-national perspective, this study examined how organizational structures, organizational culture, and teacher education interact to shape teachers' decision-making space in daily practice. It also responds to the current overemphasis on primary and secondary education in teacher autonomy research by shifting the focus to early childhood education and highlighting the role of collegial collaboration.

Findings show that while both Chinese and Finnish teachers share a child-centered approach and engage in collegial autonomy, the organizational conditions and cultural logics underpinning their autonomy differ. Finnish teachers, supported by organizational trust and minimal external pressure, are more confident in using professional judgment. In contrast, Chinese teachers, operating under tighter internal evaluation and administrative control, rely on collective negotiation to navigate within existing frameworks. Both groups enjoy relative autonomy in assessment, but the ambiguity of responsibility boundaries reflects a broader tension between curriculum guidance and implicit control.

The study offers three main contributions. First, by focusing on implementation, it deepens understanding of how autonomy is experienced in practice. Second, it underscores the importance of teacher education and organizational trust as foundations for curriculum responsibility and pedagogical leadership. Third, it brings attention to collegial autonomy, showing that in early childhood settings, collaboration can support rather than constrain individual judgment, especially under complex demands and accountability pressures.

Limitations include a limited and urban-focused sample, which may not capture the full diversity of educational experiences. Additionally, cross-linguistic and cultural interpretation may introduce some bias, given the qualitative nature of the study.

In practice, promoting teacher autonomy requires more than organizational delegation. Sustained investment in teacher education, including training in team-

based decision-making and curriculum leadership, is essential. Organizational trust and supportive administrative culture are equally important. Evaluation systems should offer clear and developmental boundaries of responsibility, allowing teachers to balance freedom and accountability. Only with such conditions can autonomy become a genuine lever for improving early childhood education and enhancing teacher well-being. Future research should expand the cultural and regional scope and include voices from principals and administrators to examine how leadership can support teacher autonomy. It would also be useful to explore how individual and collegial autonomy can be integrated in early education, with more attention to emotional and relational competencies in teacher development to better support decision-making in complex curriculum contexts.

## Sources

### Books

- OECD. (2021). Starting Strong VI: Supporting meaningful interactions in early childhood education and care. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en>
- OECD. (2022). Case study compendium – starting strong VII. OECD Publishing. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/case-study-compendium-starting-strong-vii\\_79067707-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/case-study-compendium-starting-strong-vii_79067707-en.html)
- Wermke, Wieland & Salokangas, Maija. (2021). The Autonomy Paradox: Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Governance Across Europe. 10.1007/978-3-030-65602-7.
- Pinar, W.F. (Ed.). (2013). International Handbook of Curriculum Research (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203831694>

### Articles in edited books

- Henderien Steenbeek, & Paul van Geert. (2017). Assessing Young Children's Learning and Behavior in the Classroom: A Complexity Approach. Springer International Handbooks of Education, 1279–1299. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0927-7\\_66](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0927-7_66)
- Pan, Y.-J. (2015). Chapter 1 Kindergarten Curriculum Reform in Mainland China and Reflections. *Advances in Early Education and Day Care*, 16, 1–26. [https://doi.org/10.1108/s0270-4021\(2012\)0000016004](https://doi.org/10.1108/s0270-4021(2012)0000016004)
- Roth, G. (2014). Antecedents and Outcomes of Teachers' Autonomous Motivation. Routledge EBooks, 36–51. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203119273-3>

### Journal articles

- Adick, C. (2017). Bereday and Hilker: origins of the “four steps of comparison” model. *Comparative Education*, 54(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2017.1396088>
- Ahonen, H., Niilo Franska, Tuire Palonen, Reinius, H., Netta Tiippana, & Hakkarainen, K. (2023). From autonomous actors to collaborative professionals: perceptions of co-teaching in a Finnish school community. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 68(7), 1488–1502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2250376>
- Apple, M. W. (2018). Critical curriculum studies and the concrete problems of curriculum policy and practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(6), 685–690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2018.1537373>
- Assor, A., Kaplan, H., & Roth, G. (2002). Choice is good, but relevance is excellent: Autonomy-enhancing and suppressing teacher behaviours

- predicting students' engagement in schoolwork. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72(2), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709902158883>
- Ballou, K. A. (1998). A concept analysis of autonomy. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 14(2), 102–110. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s8755-7223\(98\)80038-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s8755-7223(98)80038-0)
- Bassok, D., Markowitz, A. J., Bellows, L., & Sadowski, K. (2021). New Evidence on Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 43(1), 172–180. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720985340>
- Birbili, M., & Myrovali, A. (2019). Early childhood teachers' relationship with the official curriculum: the mediating role of professional and policy contexts. *Education Inquiry*, 11:2, 110–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2019.1687080>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chung, J. (2023). Research-informed teacher education, teacher autonomy and teacher agency: the example of Finland. *London Review of Education*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.14324/lre.21.1.13>
- Clayback, K. A., Williford, A. P., & Vitiello, V. E. (2022). Identifying Teacher Beliefs and Experiences Associated with Curriculum Implementation Fidelity in Early Childhood Education. *Prevention Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-022-01414-z>
- Devjak, T., Janžekovič Žmauc, I., & Benčina, J. (2020). The Relationship between the Factors and Conditions of the Autonomy of Preschool Teachers and Fostering the Autonomy of Preschool Children in Kindergarten. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.712>
- Dieudé, A., & Prøitz, T. S. (2022). Curriculum policy and instructional planning: Teachers' autonomy across various school contexts. *European Educational Research Journal*, 23(1), 147490412210751. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221075156>
- Erss, M. (2018). "Complete freedom to choose within limits" – teachers' views of curricular autonomy, agency and control in Estonia, Finland and Germany. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29(2), 238–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1445514>
- Erss, M., Kalmus, V., & Autio, T. H. (2016). "Walking a fine line": teachers' perception of curricular autonomy in Estonia, Finland and Germany. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48(5), 589–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1167960>
- Fan, M. (2024). Early Childhood Education Curriculum Reform in China. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 15(1), 194–199. <https://doi.org/10.54097/wyvdbj05>
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: a Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92.

- Fonsén, E., & Soukainen, U. (2019). Sustainable Pedagogical Leadership in Finnish Early Childhood Education (ECE): an Evaluation by ECE Professionals. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00984-y>
- Frostenson, M. (2015). Three forms of professional autonomy: de-professionalisation of teachers in a new light. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2015(2), 28464. <https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28464>
- Furuhagen, B., Holmén, J., & Sääntti, J. (2019). The ideal teacher: orientations of teacher education in Sweden and Finland after the Second World War. *History of Education*, 48(6), 784–805. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760x.2019.1606945>
- Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood. (2023). [Unesco.org. https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/partnership-strategy](https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/partnership-strategy)
- Guevara, J. (2022). Comparative studies of early childhood education and care: beyond methodological nationalism. *Comparative Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2022.2044603>
- Guo, K. L., & Yong, Y. (2013). Policies and Practices of Professional Development in China: What do Early Childhood Teachers Think? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(6). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n6.4>
- Halim Masnan, A., Haziq Mohd Sharif, M., Dzainuddin, M., Mokhzani Ibrahim, M., Yahaya, A., Nidzam Che Ahmad, C., Taha, H., Ramli, S., Taib, R. M., Siraj, S., & Che Mustafa, M. (2021). The concept of professional identity: Kindergarten teachers' professionalism requirement in Malaysian preschool curriculum. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, 10(1), 126. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v10i1.20849>
- Hall, M., & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2022). The teacher as street-level bureaucrat: science teacher's discretionary decision-making in a time of reform. *International Journal of Science Education*, 44(6), 980–999. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2022.2059588>
- Halttunen, L., Manjula Waniganayake, & Heikka, J. (2019). Teacher Leadership Repertoires in the Context of Early Childhood Education Team Meetings in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 8(1), 143–161. <https://journal.fi/jecer/article/view/114109>
- Han, S. S., & Weiss, B. (2005). Sustainability of Teacher Implementation of School-Based Mental Health Programs. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 33(6), 665–679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-005-7646-2>
- Harris, R. (2021). Risk aversion in a performativity culture – what can we learn from teachers' curriculum decision making in history? *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53(5), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1884294>
- Hedges, H. (2000). Teaching in Early Childhood: Time to Merge Constructivist Views so Learning through Play Equals Teaching through Play. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 25(4), 16–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910002500404>

- Heikka, J., Halttunen, L., & Waniganayake, M. (2016). Perceptions of early childhood education professionals on teacher leadership in Finland. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(2), 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1207066>
- Heinrich, M. (2015). Metamorphoses of pedagogical autonomy in German school reforms: continuities, discontinuities and synchronicities illustrated by empirical studies on school development planning, school profiling and school inspection. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2015(2), 28563. <https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28563>
- Heiskanen, N., Alasuutari, M., & Vehkakoski, T. (2019). Intertextual Voices of Children, Parents, and Specialists in Individual Education Plans. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1650825>
- Hong, W.-P., & Youngs, P. (2014). Why are teachers afraid of curricular autonomy? Contradictory effects of the new national curriculum in South Korea. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(sup1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2014.959471>
- Hopmann, S. (1999). The Curriculum as a Standard of Public Education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 18(1), 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1005139405296>
- Huo, L. (2022). Building Kindergarten Teachers' Curriculum Implementation Competence: A Collaborative Innovation Model. *Creative Education*, 13(04), 1170–1192. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2022.134073>
- Jiang, S., Li, M., & Zhang, W. (2021). 学前教育专业本科“活课程”设置初探——基于陈鹤琴“活教育”思想实践 [Practice of undergraduate living curriculum setting for preschool education major: Based on the practice of Chen Heqin's "Living Education" thought]. *陕西学前师范学院学报 (Journal of Shaanxi Xueqian Normal University)*, 37, 5. <https://doi.org/10.11995/j.issn.2095-770X.2021.05.002>
- Kang, G. (2016). Advocacy for Autonomy: Complicating the Use of Scripted Curriculum in Unscripted Spaces. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 32(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149x.2152>
- KEG. (2001). Kindergarten Education Guidelines (KEG) for aged 3–6 old children. Available at: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/200107/t20010702\\_81984.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/200107/t20010702_81984.html)
- Liu, Y., Pan, Y.-J., Zeng, Y.-X., & He, M.-Y. (2008). 幼儿园教师专业自主权的现状与影响因素的初步研究 [Preliminary research on the situation and influential factors of kindergarten teachers' professional autonomy]. *教师教育研究 (Teacher Education Research)*, 20(4), 61–66.
- Löfgren, H. (2015). A noisy silence about care: Swedish preschool teachers' talk about documentation. *Early Years*, 36(1), 4–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1062744>
- Mabunda, P. (2023). The implementation of the curriculum and assessment policy statement: School managers' perspectives and experiences. *Perspectives in Education*, 41(4). <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v41i4.6702>

- Madondo, F. (2020). Perceptions on Curriculum Implementation: A Case for Rural Zimbabwean Early Childhood Development Teachers as Agents of Change. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 35(3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2020.1731024>
- Malinen, O.-P., Väisänen, P., & Savolainen, H. (2012). Teacher education in Finland: a review of a national effort for preparing teachers for the future. *Curriculum Journal*, 23(4), 567–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2012.731011>
- Mausethagen, S., & Mølsted, C. E. (2015). Shifts in curriculum control: contesting ideas of teacher autonomy. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2015(2), 28520. <https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28520>
- McDonough, G. P. (2010). Why dissent is a vital concept in moral education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 39(4), 421–436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.521373>
- Niemi, H., Niu, S., Vivitsou, M., & Li, B. (2018). Digital Storytelling for Twenty-First-Century Competencies with Math Literacy and Student Engagement in China and Finland. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 9(4), 331–353. <https://doi.org/10.30935/cet.470999>
- Nóvoa, A. (2018). Comparing Southern Europe: the difference, the public, and the common. *Comparative Education*, 54(4), 548–561. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2018.1528781>
- Peng, H., & Liu, Y. (2012). 中美高校学前教育专业实践课程的比较 [Comparing the practical curriculum of preschool education between China and America]. *学前教育研究 (Studies in Preschool Education)*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.13861/j.cnki.sece.2012.02.015>
- Qi, X. (2019). Exploring early childhood education in China: background, development and current issues. *Journal for Educators Teachers and Trainers*, 10(2), 13–29.
- Qu, Y. (2024). 幼儿园教师教育研究力发展的现状与策略 [The current situation and strategies of kindergarten teachers' educational research power development]. *学前教育研究 (Early Childhood Education Research)*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.13861/j.cnki.sece.2024.08.008>
- Salokangas, M., Wermke, W., & Harvey, G. (2019). Teachers' autonomy deconstructed: Irish and Finnish teachers' perceptions of decision-making and control. *European Educational Research Journal*, 19(4), 329–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904119868378>
- Sanni Kahila, Heikka, J., & Sajaniemi, N. (2020). Teacher leadership in the context of early childhood education: Concepts, characteristics and enactment. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:252587560>
- Shulman, L. S. (1998). Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals. *The Elementary School Journal*, 98(5), 511–526. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461912>
- Simola, H., Rinne, R., Varjo, J., & Kauko, J. (2013). The paradox of the education race: how to win the ranking game by sailing to headwind. *Journal of*

- Education Policy, 28(5), 612–633.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.758832>
- SJ Niu, O-P Malinen, Ruokonen I, Melasalmi A, Siklander, S., Wang, X., Zhang, H., Tarja-Riitta Hurme, Moilanen, J. H., Li, X., & Wang, L. (2024). A comparative study of early childhood education and care national documents between China and Finland. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1392920>
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Sidsel Skaalvik. (2014). Teacher self-efficacy and perceived autonomy: Relations with teacher engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion. *Psychological Reports*, 114, 68–77. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:40485483>
- Sousa, D., & Moss, P. (2022). Introducing the special issue on “Comparative studies in early childhood education: past, present and future.” *Comparative Education*, 58(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2022.2071019>
- Tafa, E. (2008). Kindergarten reading and writing curricula in the European Union. *Literacy*, 42(3), 162–170. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4369.2008.00492.x>
- Tuul, M., Mikser, R., Neudorf, E., & Ugaste, A. (2015). Estonian preschool teachers’ aspirations for curricular autonomy – the gap between an ideal and professional practice. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(11-12), 1845–1861. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1028387>
- Vangrieken, K., & Kyndt, E. (2019). The teacher as an island? A mixed method study on the relationship between autonomy and collaboration. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 35, 177–204. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-019-00420-0>
- Vuorisalo, M., Rutanen, N., & Raittila, R. (2014). Constructing relational space in early childhood education. *Early Years*, 35(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.985289>
- Wang, S. (2015). 从《幼儿园教师专业标准》视角反思当前高师学前教育专业的课程体系 [Reflecting on the current preschool education curriculum system in normal universities from the perspective of the “Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards”]. *内蒙古师范大学学报（教育科学版）* [Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Educational Science)], 28, 8.
- Webb, R., Vulliamy, G., Hämäläinen, S., Sarja, A., Kimonen, E., & Nevalainen, R. (2004). A comparative analysis of primary teacher professionalism in England and Finland. *Comparative Education*, 40(1), 83–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006042000184890>
- Wermke, W., & Höstfält, G. (2013). Contextualizing Teacher Autonomy in time and space: a model for comparing various forms of governing the teaching profession. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46(1), 58–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.812681>
- Wermke, W., Olason Rick, S., & Salokangas, M. (2018). Decision-making and control: perceived autonomy of teachers in Germany and Sweden. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(3), 306–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2018.1482960>

- Wilches, J. (2007). Teacher Autonomy: A Critical Review of the Research and Concept beyond Applied Linguistics. *Ikala, Revista de Lenguaje Y Cultura*, 12(1), 245–275. <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.2720>
- Worth, J., & Van. (2020). Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention? National Foundation for Educational Research. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:226552431>
- Xia, J., Li, H.-L., & Wang, M. (2021). 幼儿园教师教学自主权及其与教学自主意识、权威开放的关系[Teaching autonomy of kindergarten teachers and its relationship with teaching autonomy awareness and authority openness]. *教育理论与实践 (Theory and Practice of Education)*, 41(23), 42–45.
- Zhang, S.-Y. (2016). 幼儿园教师专业自主权属性特征与影响因素[Attributes and influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional autonomy]. *教师教育研究 (Teacher Education Research)*, 32(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.16194/j.cnki.31-1059/g4.2020.01.022>
- Zheng, C.-C., & Jiang, Y. (2019). 幼儿园教师赋权增能发展现状与影响因素[The current situation and influencing factors of Chinese preschool teachers' empowerment]. *学前教育研究 (Early Childhood Education Research)*, (1), 62-73. <https://doi.org/10.13861/j.cnki.sece.2019.01.006>
- Zhu, J. (2008). Early childhood teacher education in China. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 34(4), 361–369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470802401552>

### Works without an author

- ELDG. (2012). Early Learning and Development Guidelines (ELDG) for aged 3–6 old children. Accessed on 8 February 2025; Available at (in Chinese): [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/201210/t20121009\\_143254.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/201210/t20121009_143254.html)
- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. (2023). Implementation of local early childhood education and care curricula at daycare centres and in family day care. Accessed on 10 February 2025; Available at: <https://www.karvi.fi/en/implementation-local-ecec-curricula-day-care-centres-and-family-day-care>
- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. (2024). Education of the professionals in the ECEC sector in Finland 2023: Evaluation of current situation and development needs. Accessed on 10 February 2025; Available at: [https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/KARVI\\_0724.pdf](https://www.karvi.fi/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/documents/KARVI_0724.pdf)
- Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood. (2023). Unesco.org. Accessed on 5 February 2025; Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/partnership-strategy>
- KEG. (2001). Kindergarten Education Guidelines (KEG) for aged 3–6 old children. Accessed on 3 February 2025; Available at (in Chinese): [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/200107/t20010702\\_81984.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/200107/t20010702_81984.html)

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (n.d.). (2022). 幼儿园保育教育质量评估指南 [Notice of the Ministry of Education on the issuance of the Guidelines for the Quality Assessment of Kindergarten Childcare Education]. Accessed on 6 February 2025; Available at (in Chinese): [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/202202/t20220214\\_599198.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3327/202202/t20220214_599198.html)
- The Finnish National Agency for Education. (2022). National core curriculum for early childhood education and care Regulation OPH-700-2022. Accessed on 10 February 2025; Available at: [https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman%20perusteet%202022\\_EN\\_final\\_23%20.pdf](https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman%20perusteet%202022_EN_final_23%20.pdf)
- UNESCO. (2021). Global partnership strategy for early childhood: 2021–2030. Accessed on 6 March 2025; Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379175>

## **Appendices:**

### APPENDIX 1: Interview protocol

#### Dimension 1 : General on School Work

Q1: How's your work as a kindergarten teacher? What are the classes you are responsible for, your main teaching tasks and other duties?

Q2: How long have you worked as a kindergarten teacher? What is your professional and educational background?

Q3: Do you have earlier experiences as teachers? Private schools, or primary schools?

Q4: Have you taken any further education, courses, academic updates lately?

#### Dimension 2: Teaching Activity

Q5: Can you tell me how do you work when preparing/planning your teaching? Is there specific standard or criteria available to help you design your activities?

Q6: What decides/determines what topics you include in your teaching?

Q7: What determines the materials and methods you use in teaching?

Q8: Is it often you discuss the learning activities with others?

Q9: What plans and documents do you use in teaching planning? Are these common to you and your colleagues? Are they helpful for you to suit individual teaching styles?

Q10: How freely do you stand in teaching planning?

#### Dimension 3: Assessment Practices

Q11: How do you conduct assessments of children? How do you work when you evaluate a child's progress in different areas?

Q12: What forms of assessment do you think are most appropriate for early childhood education and why?

Q13: Are you satisfied with the way you work?

Q14: Are there other ways you would like to do things (in terms of planning and assessment)?

#### Dimension 4: Use of Documents and National Guidelines

Q14: Which guiding documents are the most central for your work as a teacher?

Q15: How would you say you relate to the curriculum in your work as a teacher/in the planning of teaching?

Q16: How much do these standards influence your teaching planning and assessment?

## **Information Letter for Participants of Shiyi Hu's Master's Thesis Research**

### **Research on the Curriculum Autonomy of Kindergarten Teachers in China and Finland**

Dear Participant,

This is an invitation to participate in the Master's thesis research project by Shiyi Hu, a graduate student in the International Changing Education Master's program at the University of Helsinki. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in mainland China and Finland regarding their autonomy in curriculum activities, particularly in terms of potential challenges between curriculum standards and implementation, and how teachers navigate these situations.

In this study, the curriculum is considered a key tool in both educational policy and practice, reflecting the broader societal values. It encompasses both the macro-level policy standards and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that educational institutions provide to students. Curriculum autonomy refers to the active role teachers play in curriculum development (including objectives, content, teaching and learning processes, and assessment) and the flexibility they exercise in adapting national curricula to local conditions, student interests, and learning needs.

This study will offer insights from an international comparative perspective on early childhood education and aims to contribute to a more satisfying working environment for kindergarten teachers by supporting their professionalism and well-being.

The study plans to recruit four kindergarten teachers from China and four from Finland (Helsinki), each with at least four years of work experience, resulting in a total of eight participants. Data will be collected through one-on-one individual interviews in English, in which you will participate as an interviewee. The interviews may be conducted either in person or online and will last approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. If there are any gaps in the data collected during the interview, follow-up interviews may be arranged with your consent.

The research follows the ethics guidelines for research in humanities and social and behavioral sciences issued by the Finnish Board on Research Integrity, as well as the Ethical Review Measures for Life Sciences and Medical Research Involving Humans (2023) in mainland China. As this study does not involve interventions affecting participants' physical integrity, does not deviate from the principle of informed consent, does not involve research on participants under the age of 15 without parental consent, does not subject participants to unusually intense stimuli, and does not pose a risk of long-term psychological harm beyond the normal risks of daily life, there are no safety risks to participants, and ethical review is not required. If you encounter any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or offended during the interview, you are free to decline to answer.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time by contacting the researcher, without providing a reason. Withdrawal will not result in any consequences for you. Upon your withdrawal, the researcher will securely store the information collected until it is eventually destroyed, and it will no longer be used or disclosed. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the researcher.

All information related to individuals, locations, or institutions in this study will be anonymized. The researcher will use only anonymous data, and no personal information will be disclosed. Your anonymity in the thesis will be guaranteed. All data and consent forms will be stored in password-protected accounts affiliated with the University of Helsinki. Interview data will be retained for two years and then destroyed. In accordance with scientific practice, anonymized data may be shared with other researchers or journals for verification purposes. The researcher will adhere to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and China's Personal Information Protection Law (2021), and comply with the University of Helsinki's data policy (<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/research/research-environment/research-data/data-policy>).

If you have any questions related to the study or concerns regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the investigator (Shiyi Hu, email [shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi](mailto:shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi)). It is noticeable that the study is managed by the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki, under the supervision of Professor Erika Löfström.

It would be really appreciated if you could consider participating as an interviewee in my research.

Sincerely,

Shiyi Hu

Faculty of Educational Sciences

[shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi](mailto:shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi)

## APPENDIX 3: Consent form

### **Consent form to participants**

Research on *Effectiveness of Research Ethics Education*

I understand that

- participation in research is voluntary, and I may terminate my participation at any point without providing a reason.
- my identity or any information that could lead to the disclosure of my identity will not be disposed by the researcher. I have the right to withdraw my consent and ask researchers to remove already collected data. I understand that at this point the researcher may only have anonymized data, but she will do her best to delete my data.
- I can ask the researcher for more information about the research, and she will answer my questions.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 2024

---

Signature and name (legibly)

Please return to [shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi](mailto:shiyi.hu@helsinki.fi)