AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Three forms of professional autonomy: de-professionalisation of teachers in a new light

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There is a general tendency in research to claim that the teaching profession, like many other professions, has undergone substantial de-professionalisation in recent years. Such de-professionalisation is commonly explained with reference to lost professional autonomy. A problematic assumption that this article identifies is that lost professional autonomy at the general level more or less inevitably results in lost autonomy at the level of practice. In addition, an unspoken but frequently present assumption is that increased managerial power or autonomy to influence professional work will actually lead to decreased professional autonomy within the professional practice. Both these assumptions are problematised through the development and use of a three-level analysis of professional autonomy. General professional autonomy, collegial professional autonomy and individual autonomy are identified. The two latter forms of autonomy relate to professional practice. It is argued that on the basis of this levelling of professional autonomy, there are strong reasons to question the abovementioned assumptions and to study professional work at the organisational level, in particular with regard to managerial ideologies, philosophies, routines for evaluating teachers and organisational principles for professional work. Such managerial ideas and practices tend to influence the nature of teachers’ work and, correspondingly, professional autonomy at the practice level. Not least in a fragmented and decentralised school system, local conditions for professional autonomy exhibit a highly varying character.

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Could it be that the literature on the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession jumps to a questionable conclusion? Is it too quick to assume that the general loss of professional autonomy implies that professionals actually lose their autonomy at the level of practice? This, ultimately, is what this article suggests.

To start from the beginning, a general explanation of the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession, as well as other professions, is that professional actors have lost autonomy. Professional autonomy involves the freedom of professional actors to define the nature of professional work with regard to its formal contents, quality criteria, entry barriers, formal education, control mechanisms, ethics, et cetera. The loss of professional autonomy is commonly seen as the hallmark of de-professionalisation, a process wherein professional actors lose the ability to influence and the power to define the contents and forms of their own work, and fail to maintain the boundaries of their professional domains vis-à-vis other professionals, the authorities, market forces, or others (see, for example, Fredrikkson, 2010; Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995).

When it comes to the teaching profession, it has long since been argued that de-professionalisation is an ongoing reality (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995; cf. Carlgren, 1999). This is evident both in Sweden, the example on which this article will focus, and in other countries. Among the many arguments, one finds references to political reforms of the school system, such as free school choice, decentralisation, and the transfer of formal responsibility for the school system from the state to municipalities. The historical co-existence of progressive pedagogical ideals and NPM (New Public Management) ideology also matters. All such factors, it is claimed, have contributed to a substantial challenge to the professional autonomy of the teacher, which is particularly obvious in Sweden (see, among many which emphasise various aspects, Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011).

However, even though it may be hard to argue against researchers who contend that teachers’ professional autonomy has been lost, or is, at least, under constant attack, there exists a teaching practice which must not, per definition, be characterised by lost autonomy. At the very least, this is a conclusion one reaches if one is bold...
as to discriminate between the profession and the professional practice (cf. Englund, 1996; Frelin, 2013; Hoyle, 2001). This is precisely the point of departure of this article. If we do not assume that reforms and other developments have, per definition, challenged teachers’ professional autonomy at the practice level, what do we see then? In other words, if autonomy is not just talked about as professional autonomy, but also as autonomy in the profession, do we, in such a case, end up drawing the same conclusion? Possibly not.

A central figure of thought throughout this paper is the proposition that de-professionalisation in the teaching profession implies challenges to teachers’ professional autonomy, but also that such challenges may or may not occur at different levels. If one looks at autonomy from the perspective of levels, the question of professional autonomy may be seen from a new perspective. The experienced loss of autonomy may not be present at the practice level, but may be highly identifiable at the general level.

The purpose of this article is to develop a three-tiered understanding of professional autonomy in the teaching profession and to discuss its significance for the debate on de-professionalisation. Implications for research are also discussed. The three-levelled understanding of professional autonomy in this paper takes into account both teachers as a professional category and as professional actors partaking in teaching practice at the local level. Examples used in the following discussion refer to the Swedish context, but they are most likely highly relevant for general analyses of professions and de-professionalisation, both in an international context and in connection with professions other than the teaching profession.

A key contention of this article is that de-professionalisation, even though it may exist at the general level, need not necessarily imply loss of professional autonomy at the level of practice. Notably, challenges to professional autonomy need not be present at different levels simultaneously. It is also not the case that challenges to professional autonomy at one level necessarily result in challenges at other levels. Whether and why challenges occur is dependent on pedagogical ideals and influences, perspectives on pupils, ideologies of control, managerial efficiency principles, for example with regard to division of work, and other factors.

The article is theoretical in character, building on a categorisation originally published by Frostenson (2012), who discriminated between three levels of professional autonomy to understand the predicament of contemporary teachers as professionals. This article, however, develops the arguments and extends the analysis. As for structure, de-professionalisation is first discussed in terms of a loss of professional autonomy. Then, to problematise the argument of lost autonomy in the teaching profession, three forms of professional autonomy are delineated. An analysis of de-professionalisation in light of the tripartite understanding of professional autonomy follows, and, finally, some concluding implications for research close the article.

De-professionalisation as loss of autonomy

Autonomy is a central concept in the discussion on professions in general and de-professionalisation in particular. A profession is commonly viewed as a professional work category united by decisive influence and autonomy when it comes to defining the contents, quality criteria, control mechanisms, education, certification and ethics of work. Traditionally, a typical sign of professionalism has been the prevalence of a professional peer-oriented logic of organisation of work and its context (Freidson, 2001). Collegiality contextualises professional work, and the common professional value system and other mechanisms, such as educational requirements and entry barriers, condition work and its criteria of perfection. Professions, of course, do not enjoy splendid isolation, but usually require some sort of certification or authorisation from the state (cf. the recent reform of teacher certification in Sweden, see Frostenson, 2014; Lilja, 2011; Solbrekke & Englund, 2014). This is not to be seen as explicit state intervention in the profession, but may instead be part of the authorities’ assistance and safeguarding of the profession vis-à-vis other professional groups or societal actors. Boundaries exist and define the profession in relation to external constituents.

The general tendency in the literature on professions is to portray professions as under constant challenge and threat (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, and others). This may be seen as a paradox since, at the same time, various categories of professional workers strongly aspire to manifest and develop their own trade into a profession, for example nurses (Sahlin-Andersson, 1994) or consultants (Gross & Kieser, 2006). This has also been the case of vocational teachers (Borg, 2007).

Notwithstanding such a fact, the bulk of the literature suggests that teachers are subject to deep-level challenges to their professional status (Fredriksson, 2010). Explanations vary but seem to converge in a general conclusion. De-professionalisation is considered to be a fact and lost professional autonomy a central aspect of this. One could relate the alleged loss of professional autonomy to the mandate of the profession to decide on and influence the overarching frames of work, for example education, general organisational forms of the school system, principal organisation, collective agreements, boundaries of the profession and other issues. The general picture, at least in the Swedish case (Parding, 2010; Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, and others), is that teachers suffer from ever-increasing hardships, such as longer working hours, stricter spatial organisation of work, more administration, greater pressure from pupils, principals and parents, for example with regard to
marking, stronger forms of evaluation, new and tradition-
ally irrelevant work tasks like marketing the school, poor 
wage development, et cetera. This is interpreted as a result 
of de-professionalisation. Teachers simply lose the power 
to influence their work, becoming prey to malicious 
management ideologies, political reforms, pedagogical 
experiments, incompetence of municipal and private 
education organisers and so on.

The open question which must be asked, however (and 
perhaps this is a heretical question considering the general 
tendency of the literature on professional autonomy in 
general and teachers’ professional autonomy in parti-
cular), is whether a loss of professional autonomy actually 
matters to teachers in their actual professional practice. 
Do teachers have to care? If, for example, a teacher has 
worked for 30 years, is trusted by school management, 
enjoys bearable working hours, and is given full confidence 
with regard to the planning, execution, marking and other 
traditional aspects of teaching, what is the problem with 
de-professionalisation? Does such a problem even exist? 
The teacher still masters the professional activity with 
skill, competence and a mandate of trust and relative 
freedom. One clue might be the way in which this 
particular teacher’s experienced autonomy is under chal-
lenge (if indeed it is) within the professional practice. 
The following attempt to define levels of professional auton-
omy may serve as a tool to explain why or why not 
autonomy may be experienced by teachers from a profes-
sional practice perspective.

In understanding what autonomy may imply, both at 
the general level and at the level of practice, the three-level 
typology mentioned above will be developed. This cate-
gorisation captures professional autonomy at the general 
level (general professional autonomy) and at the level of 
practice (collegial professional autonomy and individual 
autonomy, respectively). Differentiating between levels or 
aspects of autonomy is not unique to this article. For 
example, Wermke (2013) elaborates on the concepts of 
institutional autonomy (regarding legal or status issues) 
and service autonomy (referring to autonomy in practice). 
Concepts like managerial or organisational autonomy 
have also been developed (see, for example, Evetts, 2003, 
2009, 2011). Managerial (or organisational) autonomy, 
however, has been interpreted as the very opposite of 
professional autonomy (Stenlås, 2009, 2011), since it refers 
to the autonomy of managers or other administrative 
agents within organisations, with the mandate to decide on 
conditions of professional work. The categorisation of 
this article, however, retains the perspective of the profes-
sional – the teacher – as the agent whose autonomy is challenged. 
It offers a twofold interpretation of practice autonomy 
(possibly corresponding to service autonomy) to capture 
both the collegial and individual aspects of professional 
autonomy in the teaching profession.

Three forms of professional autonomy

General professional autonomy

General professional autonomy refers to the frames of 
professional work, with regard to, for example, organisa-
tion of the school system, legislation, entry requirements, 
teacher education, curricula, procedures and ideologies of 
control (such as management by objectives rather than 
detailed rules for the school system). Professional auton-
omy at this level consists in the mandate to organise the 
framing of teachers’ work, for example through influen-
cing the general organisation or control principles of the school. Many researchers have this level as their vantage 
point when discussing the de-professionalisation of tea-
chers, frequently in the form of studies examining con-
sequences of certain reforms, for example the Swedish free 
school reform of the early 90s (Carlgren & Klette, 2008; 
Lundström & Holm, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011; 
Parding, 2011) or consequences of NPM (Andersen, 2008; 
Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995).

One observation at this level is that the professional 
teaching body has not been able to dictate the conditions 
and frames of professional work at this higher institutional 
level. In the Swedish case, the reform that made munic-
ipalities the principal organisers of primary and secondary 
education (replacing the state) met with fierce resistance 
from teachers. Teacher training and education has been 
subject to constant reform and change. Collective agree-
ments on working hours and other important aspects 
of teaching have, according to many, been to the dis-
advantage of teachers (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wenström, 
2014; Zaremba, 2011). Decentralisation of school govern-
ance has implied increased power to decide on the con-
tents, forms and evaluation of teachers’ work (Lundahl, 
2005). Free school choice, which has resulted in the 
framing of professional work in a market context, has in 
turn implied that teachers have been assigned tasks of 
marketing and selling that have traditionally been com-
pletely foreign to professional work (Fredriksson, 2010; 
Lundström & Holm, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011). 
To some, this is a consequence not only of the reforms as 
such, but also of NPM as an ideological construct clashing 
with traditional professional logic of organising work 
(Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995). A new discursive 
practice of control, measurement and efficiency is said to 
have established itself over the teachers’ sphere of influence 
(Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010; Lunneblad, 2010; Selander, 
2006).

What is striking, when it comes to this challenge of 
general professional autonomy in the teaching profession, 
is that the developments have to a high degree occurred 
without the explicit request or participation of teachers 
themselves. For example, the establishment of large private 
technopreneurships owned by venture capitalists as prin-
cipal school organisers has been a more or less unanticipated
development that has conditioned the frames of teachers’ work and, as discussed below, in some cases also the contents of it (Fredriksson, 2010; Frostenson, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011; Parding, 2011; Sandoff & Norén 2002). From the perspective of pupils, of course, such a development has implied further opportunities to choose schools. This freedom of choice, however, affects the nature of teachers’ work, situating it in a market context (Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010; Lund, 2007). Managerial practices, competition, ‘customer’ adaptation, evaluation systems, accountability and control are likely to follow. On another note, however, other researchers claim that the profession has been highly influenced by ideals of care, emphasising not traditional professional values, but the personal development of the pupil (Stenläs, 2009, 2011). These tendencies, labelled as attacks on the profession from both the political left and right (Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011), tend to undermine the traditionally strong professional authority and autonomy of the teacher, it is argued.

Such a development refers to both a more general reform context and ideological setting, in opposition to traditional professional ideals. The results of this development point in one direction, to de-professionalisation of the teaching profession. Such a conclusion bears traces of generality. As a professional body, teachers have not been able to set the direction of school developments in recent decades. Politicians, market forces, ideological reformists, and others have paved the way for a development that need not in all its details but in its generality be seen as beyond the control of the teaching profession as such. One may argue that recent Swedish reforms follow this trajectory. For example, tendencies towards marks in earlier grades, not a reality in Sweden for several decades, are not genuinely supported by the two large teacher trade unions. The teacher certification reform was in principle supported by the teacher unions but was paradoxically organised to include state verification of the quality and relevance of teacher exams and their contents rather than internal professional judgment and evaluation. In addition, the reform had to be revised during the process in order not to exclude too many teachers from certification (Fredenson, 2014; Lilja, 2011; Solbrekke & Englund, 2014).

In sum, actors like the state, private enterprises within the school system, and municipalities have conditioned the frames of the teaching profession in such a way that the actual influence, in the form of professional autonomy, can be said to have been undermined in recent decades. What this has implied at the level of practice is, however, another important aspect of de-professionalisation and professional autonomy in general.

**Collegial professional autonomy**

Decentralisation implies that issues involving pedagogical concepts, control and organisation of professional work, etcetera, become issues where local school management has decisive influence (Lundahl, 2005). One interpretation of this is that *managerial autonomy* (enjoyed by, for example, principals at local schools), has increased, possibly at the expense of professional workers (Evett, 2003, 2009, 2011; Stenläs, 2009, 2011). One important issue is, however, how such local influence in the form of managerial autonomy is used and in which way it stands in opposition to collegial influence within the teaching profession. The loss of general professional autonomy and the rise of (reform generated) managerial autonomy at the school level may pose a substantial challenge to the possibility of exercising autonomy at the level of practice. But is it, per definition, true that collegiality, one aspect of autonomy, cannot be upheld at the practice level even if general professional autonomy is lost and local school management has a say when it comes to organising professional work? If the answer to this question is no, *collegial professional autonomy* becomes a relevant issue for analysis.

Collegial professional autonomy in the teaching profession concerns the teachers’ collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at local level, a form of autonomy enjoyed to varying degrees in practice (see, for example, Fredriksson, 2010; Svensson, 2008; Wermke, 2013). Judging from the Swedish case, decentralisation has not just implied increased influence of school management at the expense of the teachers. A central idea behind letting the school governance reform of the 90s was to give teachers the possibility to develop new pedagogical ideas and concepts in new forms (Lundahl, 2005). Possibilities to establish, run and organise schools on principles of cooperation and collegiality were introduced. This is an aspect of local level influence based on an idea of joint efforts to organise and develop professional work on the basis of pedagogical ideas. According to this idea, the phenomena of collegial and managerial autonomy would converge. Increased autonomy to manage schools would be exercised in a collegial manner.

However, few would argue that such a development has taken place in the Swedish case. Swedish schools tend to be managed by either municipalities or, as it turned out, large private educational organisers, making truly collegially driven schools uncommon. But despite such developments, both public and private school organisers and local school management have had pedagogical or organisational preferences that may have endorsed or even required teachers to work collegially through collective forms of work (cf. Stenläs 2009, 2011). The emphasis on or even requirement of collective forms of work may be an expression of pedagogical preferences or ideals by school management. From a practice perspective, however, the corollary of such requirements may be increased experienced autonomy in collegial form, whereas individual autonomy in the form of individual decision-making power and influence on work is downplayed. Collegiality
as a managerial preference or ideal may imply substantial freedom for teachers in shaping the contents and forms of collegial work relating to teaching practice. Thus, increased collegial autonomy may follow.

Such reasoning suggests that collegial autonomy may not be contrary to managerial or ideological preferences, but fully in line with them. Within the sphere of collegial autonomy, substantial freedom of action and influence may prevail. In other words, decentralisation of decision-making power need not automatically imply decreased autonomy at the level of practice, since collective forms of work, preferred by school management, may require it.

One should bear in mind that collegial autonomy may be exercised in organisational settings where teachers, at a general level, may be subject to strong restrictive organisational and pedagogical ideals. Collegial forms of work, where teachers are, for example, required to work in teams or collectively according to ideals of problems-based or entrepreneurial learning or other concepts, may imply restricted autonomy from a general professional perspective, but not from a collegial one. Decisions concerning contents and forms of work are reached jointly. This paradox has to do with the fact that managerial ideas about the frames and methodology of local professional work organisation and pedagogy co-exist with teacher autonomy in terms of defining the contents and general forms of work, at least at the collegial level. Despite the challenge to general professional autonomy, collegiality at the local practice level implies that professional actors define the contents, pedagogy and forms of work based on professional competence. This does not mean that any teacher can do whatever he or she likes, but that a requirement exists on collegial action with regard to professional work at the local level. What to do, how to do it, as well as how to examine and assess are issues that are decided upon jointly if collegial autonomy exists.

One may argue that collegial autonomy stands in opposition to individual autonomy (see below). This may or may not be the case. Collective forms of work, including decision-making power over what and how work should be performed may be the opposite of individual autonomy. But individual autonomy does not in any sense preclude collegial efforts in teaching practice. In such cases, individual autonomy is, so to speak, used collegially. Depending on the nature of practical work, individual autonomy of teachers may co-exist with collegial autonomy. Perhaps this is not the case from a strictly organisational point of view, but probably is in practice. Even structured forms of work may imply structures within which the individual teacher has substantial freedom to choose what themes or methods to work with.

A consequence of this reasoning is that collegial autonomy may actually be generated through two different processes. It may be seen as the delegated and preferred principle for organising work from a managerial perspec-

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**Individual autonomy**

Individual autonomy may be understood as the individual's opportunity to influence the contents, frames and controls of the teaching practice. It involves the existence of a practice-related auto- formulation of the contents, frames and controls of professional work (Järkestig Berggren, 2011; Krejsler, 2005). This includes choice of teaching materials, pedagogy, mandate to decide on the temporal and spatial conditions of work, and to influence the evaluation systems of professional teaching practice. Central to individual autonomy is a substantial sphere of action and decision-making power tied to the professional practice of the individual teacher. This, of course, does not imply complete freedom (Järkestig Berggren, 2011), since the teacher must still respect authoritative rules and prescriptions, for example with regard to subject content and marking. But within those frames, the limits for individual influence on creating, inventing, adopting course content and teaching are manifold. The enjoyment of individual autonomy at the level of practice is possible when local school management has limited actual opportunity to curb it (for example through the mandated use of strongly collective forms of work, standardised modules for teaching or other devices), or little interest in doing it, possibly because of a strong trust mandate given to individual teachers.

At least in the Swedish case, the teacher has traditionally been trusted to choose and dictate the means to achieve what is required in the curriculum, for example by choosing pedagogical means and ideas, course books and other ingredients of professional practice. One concrete example of a challenge to individual autonomy is the compulsory use of ready-made modules or tutorials for teaching. Some schools, mainly under private principal organisation, declare openly that teaching material is not chosen at the discretion of the individual teacher (see, for example, Kunskapsskolan, 2015), but must be decided upon centrally and adopted and used within all schools run by the enterprise. Others even reject the use of textbooks. For professional teachers within such organisations, the
corollary is that they are stripped of one of the traditionally central aspects of professional work and practice, the freedom to choose and develop teaching material as preferred by the teacher herself. The holistic character of professional work is undermined by externally decided principles of division of labour where traditional aspects of work are removed from practice and allocated to specialists, legitimised through norms of efficiency and quality.

Infringement on individual autonomy in the teaching practice does not, of course, have to emanate from local school management. Administrative duties, for example with regard to documentation, may follow directives or rules from authorities. Such duties may severely contrast with the possibility to undertake professional work in a desired manner. Such infringements refer to a high degree to the contents of professional work rather than its forms. Experiences of such administrative duties may vary considerably between teachers and schools.

The frames of professional teaching practice may refer to temporal and spatial organisation of work. That is, individual autonomy presupposes relative professional control of where and at what times work is performed. One may argue that such professional autonomy implies flexibility for teachers, but such flexibility is constantly under challenge, following demands on teachers to organise their work to facilitate flexibility of organisations and pupils. That is, flexibility stands against flexibility (Frostenson, 2012). Being required to be present at work between 8 A.M. and 5 P.M. implies that teaching practice becomes spatially and temporally bound, severely affecting individual autonomy in terms of the freedom to organise work. Motivations for temporally and spatially decreased individual autonomy are usually argued to be the alleged needs of pupils, pedagogical concepts and organisational priorities. A striking formulation could be found on the homepage of a Swedish school a few years ago: ‘To manifest and develop our strong position in the market, we require employees that are driven and not afraid to work hard. Flexibility and accessibility are also of importance to us, since they mean that we can work according to the needs of the pupil. For this reason, it is important that our recruited staff are accessible and see it as self-evident that they will be there all day long for the pupils’ (NTI-gymnasiet, 2011, author’s translation). This is an example of time and space related flexibility of the teacher being a mere extension of the requirements of the school and the pupils.

As for controls, the highly unevenly distributed existence of performance control systems is a concrete example of the issue of control in the teaching practice. Whereas teachers traditionally monitor the output of their work either collegially or, even, individually, the emergence of performance management systems (such as course evaluations, questionnaires related to teaching practice, evaluations and rankings made by school management, for example through observations) strongly challenges traditional professional quality controls. However, individual autonomy does not necessarily exclude the existence of evaluations and controls related to teaching practice. The central issue, rather, is who is in control of the instruments of control and how these instruments are used. The challenge to individual autonomy lies specifically in the use of metrics or other forms of evaluation as decisive criteria for quality. That is, the ultimate criterion of successful professional work is the attainment of a good score on a questionnaire administered by school management or the like. The teacher becomes accountable rather than responsible (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), implying that the teacher loses the traditionally enjoyed mandate of trust. Instead, ongoing adaptation to the measurement systems is necessary for the professional teacher.

What is important to note, however, is that infringements on individual autonomy with regard to content, frames and controls of professional practice, need not necessarily occur. Whereas some schools still allow for considerable autonomy with regard to teaching practice, others challenge professional work through organisational and managerial measures severely infringing on the professional autonomy related to various aspects of teaching practice.

De-professionalisation in a new light

Numerous studies have focused on the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, to mention just a few). A common conclusion seems to be an ongoing de-professionalisation that expresses itself through ever decreasing opportunities to control and direct the profession. Notwithstanding all the merits of such studies, a problem touched upon in this article is the conclusion that decreased professional autonomy automatically implies a strongly reduced independent sphere of action at the practice level. What this article actually problematises is two underlying assumptions more or less present in studies on professionalism.

The first assumption suggests an ‘all or nothing’ approach to professional autonomy. This ‘all or nothing’ assumption implies that lost general professional autonomy more or less automatically implies lost professional autonomy within the professional practice. In the words of this article, de-professionalisation in terms of lost general professional autonomy would imply the loss or undermining of collegial and individual autonomy.

The second assumption suggests that if managerial autonomy exists in the sense that local school managers or, possibly, principal educational organisers are granted the privilege of influencing professional practice, with an explicit mandate to control its contents, forms and outputs, they will actually do so in a way that undermines collegial and individual autonomy. In other words, managerial
autonomy is, according to the assumption, presumed to be used in a way that undermines collegial and individual autonomy. To wit, ‘manager’ may in the Swedish case mean the principal of the local school, which is a legally required position according to the Swedish School Act, or any other person with managerial influence on local schools, for example within a private education organiser with several school units.

Without questioning whether real challenges to teachers’ professional autonomy exist, the article argues that both of these assumptions are highly problematic. The first argument, strongly deductive in its character, assumes that the natural consequence of a loss of general autonomy is a loss of professional autonomy at the local level, implying that collegial and individual autonomy are undermined. Such an argument seems to underestimate the fragmentation evident in at least the Swedish school system today, to a high degree the result of decentralisation and the possibility to influence how teachers work at local level (see, for example, Frostenson, 2012). What it means to be a teacher in one school might be something quite different in another. Indeed, sometimes the differences are evident even within the same school. The teacher may be seen as a specialist, coach, leader, service staff member or a childcare worker, depending on the ideals of school management. Within this fragmented picture, some teachers – but not all – experience practice-based professional autonomy, more or less in the same way as they traditionally had. Others, however, experience quite another character of teaching work, in stark contrast to any traditional notion of what characterises the position of the professional teacher.

The argument may, of course, be one of definition. According to such a view, experienced professional autonomy within the practice of teaching would be a kind of false consciousness or illusion because teachers are not in full control of the practice, but only granted autonomy by management. Managerially mandated professional autonomy would not be ‘real’, because it is conditioned by managerial ideologies and decisions. However, such a definitional rejection of the existence of collegial and individual autonomy in the teaching profession seems presumptuous, since it obscures the significance of the profession as a practised reality, in other words the professional experience and practice of autonomy. Against such a backdrop, the ‘all or nothing’ assumption is simply strange. As will be discussed below, professional practice – rather than just the professional frames, boundaries, educational contexts, et cetera – is an underestimated locus for examining the existence of non-existence of autonomy.

The second argument – the conviction that managers at the local school level or among principal school organisers will, if they are given the chance, establish a regime that undermines professional autonomy within the teaching practice – is, one could argue, simply false. At the very least, the argument does not hold if one considers the entire spectrum of schools, where school managements are actually given relative freedom in implementing ideals related to control, organisation and pedagogy. The fact that such ideals differ implies that the experienced practice and professional autonomy of teachers will differ. Strict output control, strong division of labour, as well as strict temporal and spatial organisation of teachers’ work can be assumed to decrease experienced professional autonomy at the level of practice. Such solutions and ideals, however, need not be present. Managerial autonomy may actually manifest itself through decentralisation of all relevant decisions concerning practice to teachers. And in some cases, as the discussion on collegial autonomy suggests, a form of autonomy may actually be in the pedagogical and organisational interests of school management. Autonomy at the practice level then becomes an integral part of the management philosophy of principal or local school organisers. The fact that the state has transferred several governing mechanisms to the municipalities and schools (resource allocation, class size, remedial teaching, governance of teachers’ working conditions, et cetera, see Lundahl, 2005) does not necessarily imply that municipalities, private education organisers and local schools use these means to severely impact autonomy in teachers’ professional practice (even though some obviously do).

Whether a general adoption of managerial, pedagogical or administrative practices that undermine professional autonomy has occurred at the practice level is an empirical question, not a definitional one. The contemporary fragmented Swedish school system actually offers possibilities to sustain experienced professional autonomy at the level of practice. It could be argued, of course, that the mere fragmentation of the school system and the teaching profession is a sign of de-professionalisation as such. But even if this is the case, macro level de-professionalisation should not be taken as an automatic confirmation of micro-level practice de-professionalisation in terms of lost autonomy.

Notably, if the two assumptions described earlier in this section do not hold, de-professionalisation should be seen in a new light. Not least, it is very important to identify the level at which challenges to professional autonomy actually occur and what the consequences of such challenges are. One way of understanding this is also to identify which aspects that traditionally constitute a profession are upheld within new organisational, ideological and pedagogical regimes. In other words, to understand de-professionalisation, one should not assume without careful analysis that all aspects that characterise professions (control of relevant education, work content, certification, quality standards, ethics, et cetera) have been lost in the teaching profession. For example, little
influence with regard to general organisational principles of the school system does not mean that teachers are not allowed to influence the contents of daily work (Frostenson, 2012). Or, in another vein, the decentralisation of the school system actually allows for collegial autonomy in the sense that, for example, teachers with a pedagogical ideal can establish and run schools (cf. Lundahl, 2005; Román, Hallsén, Nordin, & Ringarp, 2015).

Implications for research
One relatively obvious consequence of the previous reasoning is that studies of professional autonomy and the de-professionalisation of teachers should not stop at the general level, limiting themselves to the frames of the teaching profession. Of course, this article does not claim that studies usually do end at this level. Studies, such as those by Fredriksson (2010), Parding (2010) and Wermke (2013), belong to the many examples which certainly do go into teachers’ work and practice to understand phenomena like autonomy or spheres of action. But it should be emphasised that more general reform studies at least suffer the risk of committing the fallacy of the ‘illicit’ assumptions mentioned earlier. It is of considerable importance to understand not only the reforms as such, but also their actual implications given the decentralised and fragmented picture of today’s school system. That is, if reforms result in extended managerial mandates of influence and power within the school system, it is important to study how such mandates are actually used, for example with regard to policy enactment (cf. Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Doing so will imply valuable insights into professional practice, which is crucial for understanding the development of the teaching profession.

Because of the fragmentation of the school system, evident in the Swedish case not least due to decentralisation, there is a further need to identify and problematise professional activity at the level of practice. Such an approach not only focuses on teaching practice as such, but also on ideologies, pedagogical ideals, organisational principles and management approaches of local school management and principal school organisers. The local organisational context impacts on what it means to be a teacher to a higher degree than the more general development of the teaching profession probably reveals, since it is the local school management (and principal education organisers at the meso level) that possess the means to challenge the professional identity at school level. Not least, performance measurement, division of labour, standardised tasks, and practically and ideologically motivated approaches to pedagogy are important factors for an understanding of how the professional practice actually develops.

A multi-faceted school context, like the Swedish one, makes it possible for school managers to mould and carve out the professional role of the teacher in a discretionary way. One aspect of this discretion is ideological, another is instrumental, implying the choice and use of certain instruments to control professional activities. Both aspects are important to understand, hopefully without falling into the trap of labelling everything with an element of control and measurement as NPM. Rather, to understand professional autonomy and potential de-professionalisation, not only managerial ideologies must be understood, but also how such ideological philosophies of management are used (or not) in conjunction with pedagogical ideals. The important paradox of the management of professions in a country like Sweden (and presumably other countries too) is that managerial autonomy (cf. Evetts, 2003, 2009, 2011) also implies the possibility to endow teachers with substantial freedom within their professional practice, even though, admittedly, this is not always the case. That is, the managerial predicament of exercising influence on professional work is not necessarily used (or ‘misused’) to undermine teacher professionalism in practice.

Another way of putting this is to call for studies that carefully examine what actually defines and conditions the experienced action sphere of professional teaching. The possibilities to create local autonomy of collegial or individual character, as described in this article, should not be underestimated. Whether the will to further such autonomy exists is quite another issue.

In understanding school management and its consequences, it is not only the philosophies, instruments, controls and other aspects that are of interest. The individual principal or manager will most likely be important. If a principal is a primus inter pares, for example an esteemed colleague with experience from the school, another micro-level climate will probably prevail in the school in comparison to a case where a former military officer or person from business is employed as the principal. As already noted, managerial and collegial autonomy may converge if a school is run, for example, by a number of collegially organised teachers with a particular pedagogical ideal. Who organises the school (as principal educational organiser) is probably also of importance. At any rate, increased fragmentation and individualisation following decentralisation should imply that professionalism must be understood at the levels where it is exercised. Whatever the case, in the Swedish school system, professional autonomy is certainly conditioned at the local level, because of the strong mandate of school managers and principal educational organisers to organise professional work.

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