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Unveiling teachers' professional agency and decision-making in professional learning: the illusion of choice

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ABSTRACT

Current research on teachers' professional learning emphasises the crucial role of teachers' agency. Teacher agency is emphasised because it empowers teachers with decision-making capabilities that foster a sense of ownership in their professional learning. Based on our research, teachers are frequently marginalised in designing and implementing professional learning, which in turn undermines their agency and autonomy. This article presents a portion of a comprehensive study using qualitative research methods. It draws on interviews with ten classroom teachers and five school leaders from government and non-government primary and secondary schools in Adelaide, Australia that relate to their perceived autonomy and agency in their professional learning. The results underline the pivotal role of teacher agency and highlight challenges in perceived professional autonomy and agency. The control exerted by policymakers and educational leaders can restrict teachers' agency in various aspects of their professional learning. Addressing these barriers with organisational shifts can empower teachers to own their professional learning. We argue that future research should aim to explore the factors influencing teachers' agency that shape their professional learning decisions.

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Introduction

The emphasis on enhancing teacher quality to improve student outcomes and boost economic competitiveness has led to a policy dilemma around teacher professional learning (PL) (Mockler 2013, 2020). Teacher professional learning is perceived both as a policy problem and a solution within contemporary education policy, as highlighted by Mockler (2013). This dual framing arises from concerns regarding teacher quality and the need for interventions through regulation and standardisation, alongside recognition of PL as critical for addressing the perceived crisis of teacher quality. This perspective has driven policy frameworks pushing for PL that aims to improve standards of teacher and teaching quality (Mourshed *et al.* 2011). Teacher learning catering to the performative agenda removes the ownership of learning (Lloyd and Davis 2018) and diminishes teachers' motivation for participation (Rodman 2019). Teachers' input is typically overlooked in PL design and execution (Campbell 2017, Shakuri-Rad 2018, Christie 2019, Cooper *et al.* 2020). When granted, decision-making power usually aligns with external policy objectives (Priestley *et al.* 2015). Molla and Nolan (2020) posit that fostering teacher agency in PL redefines existing value systems, expanding professional expertise and boosting confidence.

Amid shifting educational trends, the movement towards professional learning communities (PLCs) stands out, emphasising the value of collaborative learning in enhancing classroom practices

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(Steyn 2017) while empowering teachers as professional agent in their PL (Brodie 2021). Despite collaborative learning's proven efficacy, our research underscores the potential for superficial adoption without a genuine commitment to implementation. Considering PLCs' multidimensional nature and the need for a robust support system to advocate for each dimension, we will illustrate in the discussion section of this article how neglecting fundamental elements of each dimension can result in a hollow implementation, resembling a shell without substance.

Our study's findings reveal that the concept of school-based professional learning and PLCs has been overemphasised, often lacking substantial teacher agency. This understanding leads to misconceptions within schools that merely introducing collaborative formats can automatically empower teachers and fulfil their objectives. Such an approach often undervalues the individual inputs of teachers, overshadowing them with an overemphasis on the collectivist approach. Recognising that genuine empowerment requires a balanced acknowledgement of individual insights, collaborative in its intention, is crucial.

Despite extensive research in the professional learning literature, which has delved into teacher agency in PL, a fundamental question remains: To what extent do teachers perceive they truly exert professional autonomy and agency in their professional learning? Therefore, this study is designed to investigate teachers' self-reported agency and decision-making processes in their professional learning which have been validated by insights from interviews with school leaders. Additionally, we employed policy analysis to discern how institutional policies influence teachers' choices, agency, and decision-making. By examining these intertwined elements within the framework of organisational and democratic professionalism, drawing from Sachs' conceptualisation, this study explores the intricate interplay between teacher professionalism and their agency and decision-making in various aspects of their PL.

While this study's findings align with the existing literature, which predominantly suggests a deficiency of teacher input into professional learning, we aimed to extend this discourse by posing a critical question: Is the overall landscape concerning teachers' professional autonomy and agency as unequivocally grey as it seems? To answer to this question and thoroughly assess teachers' professional autonomy and agency in PL, we crafted a checklist (Table 6) based on the interviews with the teachers and school leaders in this research project and an exploration of the literature. The checklist draws upon these diverse perspectives to construct a nuanced understanding of teachers' professional autonomy and agency in PL, acknowledging its multifaceted nature and the various factors that influence teachers' capacity to shape their PL experiences.

This study's significance lies in its potential to inform policy development aimed at enhancing the professional learning experience for teachers. Education systems can leverage this research to guide policy adjustments that promote teachers' professional autonomy and agency, fostering a more coherent alignment of PL with teachers' needs and expectations. Education leaders and policymakers can utilise the findings to reshape the role of teachers in their PL, creating a more teacher-centred experience. By delving into teachers' self-reported agency and decision-making processes, this research significantly contributes to the body of literature on teacher agency in PL, particularly through its holistic approach to teacher autonomy and agency by providing a comprehensive checklist. The checklist offers a framework for assessing teachers' professional autonomy and agency, providing policymakers with a practical tool for evaluating and enhancing PL initiatives. Additionally, policy analysis elucidates how institutional policies impact teachers' choices and decision-making in professional learning contexts, facilitating the development of tailored policies that promote meaningful teacher participation and empowerment.

Theoretical framework and relevant literature

Professionalism and professional learning

Recent trends in policy development lean towards performative ideologies in teacher professionalism. Sachs (2001) describes this as a managerial/organisational perspective, prioritising

standardisation and accountability at the expense of teacher autonomy and agency. Consequently, teachers often implement policies devised by others, with their expertise overlooked and their learning constrained (Smith 2017), affecting their agency (Campbell 2015, Priestley *et al.* 2015). Overlooking teachers' contributions in shaping policies can result in disengagement and hindered participation in professional learning (Du Plessis 2019). The emphasis on measurable outcomes and compliance mechanisms fosters a sense of mistrust, eroding teachers' authenticity, commitment, and professional judgement (Hardy 2018, Appel 2020). Mockler (2013) and Sachs (2016) argue that promoting organisational professionalism through standards has resulted in diminished teachers' autonomy and professional identity in Australian schools.

Critics argue that this managerial approach limits teachers from engaging in contextual professional learning and hinders the growth of a collaborative professional culture (Gewirtz *et al.* 2009, Butler and Schnellert 2012). The performative perspective on teacher learning supports PL that promotes a specific form of teacher professionalism and satisfies professional registration requirements (Mockler 2020). This type of PL, quantified in hours to match standards, diverges from authentic learning stemming from contextualised issues and practices (Mockler 2020). Such learning might not necessarily facilitate genuine understanding or meaning-making, leading to actual changes in practice (Ling and Mackenzie 2015, Mockler 2020).

To foster meaningful and engaging professional learning, an alternative approach should prioritise democratic professionalism (Anderson and Cohen 2018) over external factors like professional standards. This transition requires understanding the contextual intricacies of the teaching profession and the lived experiences of educators navigating the demanding educational landscape while catering to their distinct individual and communal requisites (Du Plessis 2019).

Teacher agency and professional learning

Eteläpelto *et al.* (2013) define professional agency as the ability of teachers or school communities to influence, make choices, and take stances that shape their work and professional identity. Molla and Nolan (2020) describe agency as the proactive decision-making and goal-directed efforts of individuals or groups within specific contexts. They underscore the integral relationship between agency and teacher professionalism, noting, 'at the core of teacher, professionalism is agency' (Molla and Nolan 2020, p. 68). They emphasise that teachers must have the autonomy to pursue what they value in their practice, encompassing thoughtful choices, principled actions, and the ability to drive change. Calvert (2016) depicts teachers' agency in professional learning as the inherent ability of teachers to actively and positively direct their professional advancement and impact that of their colleagues. Influenced by individual motivations and the structural conditions of educational settings, this agency enables teachers to proactively select and participate in learning experiences that align with their goals rather than simply being passive recipients.

Smith (2017) and Avalos (2011) posit that teachers' professional agency is central to learning, placing teachers as its object and subject. A key link exists between teachers' motivation and sense of learning ownership (Smith 2017), emphasising their voice's importance (Cooper *et al.* 2020). By emphasising teachers' agency as the cornerstone of PL, teachers' professional aspirations can be aligned with broader educational objectives, promoting an environment conducive to autonomy, wellbeing, and confidence (James and Patricia 2007, Du Plessis 2019, Power and Goodnough 2019).

Driven by the influence of professionalism on teachers' agency (Pearson and Moomaw 2005, Johnston 2015), in this study we conceptualise professional agency in professional learning as teachers' agentic capacity to actively manage their learning and create a conducive learning context and navigate the critical role of the agentic space. Building upon Calvert (2016) depiction of teacher agency, we emphasise the proactive nature of teachers' agency, influenced by individual motivations and structural conditions in educational settings. This agency enables teachers to select and engage in learning experiences aligned with their professional goals, moving beyond passive recipient roles to become active participants in their professional learning.

Teacher agency and illusion of choice in professional learning

Despite the agreement in the literature regarding the significance of teacher agency in PL, numerous researchers (Smith 2017, Shakuri-Rad 2018, Christie 2019, Rodman 2019, Cooper *et al.* 2020) have highlighted that teachers often lack control over the content and form of their PL. The marginalised and silenced teachers (Smith 2017) are far from the most needed democratic professionals with autonomy and responsibility who self-direct their learning (Mockler 2013, Campbell 2015). The encouraged form of ‘controlled and compliant’ professionalism (Sachs 2016, p. 423) through professional standards adversely impacts teachers’ engagement in professional learning, their innovation in teaching, and their practice (Mills *et al.* 2021). The de-professionalisation of teachers can occur when their decision-making powers and voices are undermined (Shakuri-Rad 2018).

The conceptual framework of this study, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, draws upon the rich literature discussed above to guide the investigation. Figure 1 depicts the current landscape of teacher professional learning, providing insight into its underlying dynamics. In contrast, Figure 2 presents our proposed framework, which views teachers as agents of their learning and emphasises the alignment of context with teachers’ experiences to meet their needs and expectations.

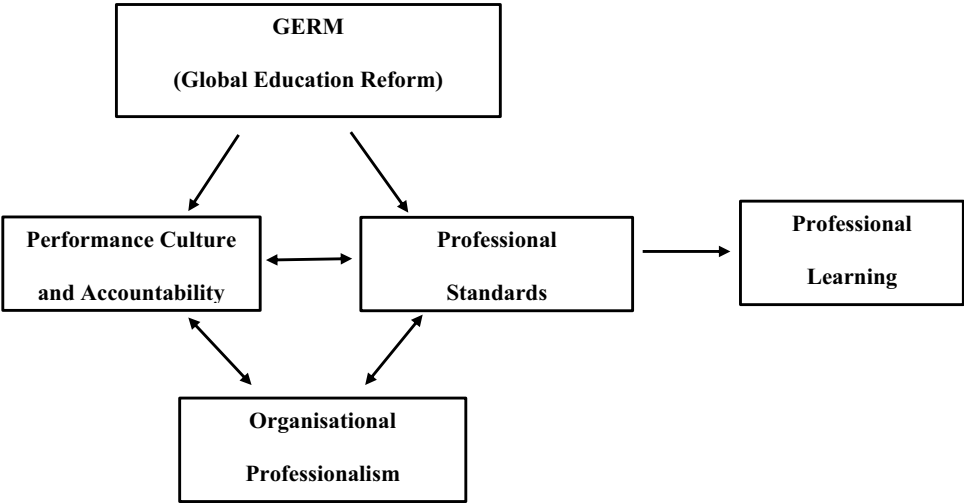


Figure 1. Current drivers of teachers’ professional learning.

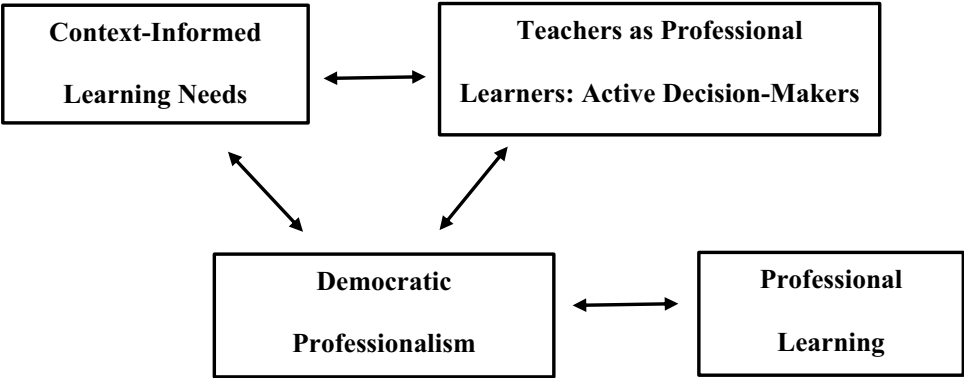


Figure 2. Proposed approach to teachers’ professional learning.

Research design

This qualitative study utilised an interpretivist paradigm, which aims to comprehend the lived experiences of individuals from their perspective. According to Hennink *et al.* (2020), the interpretive approach focuses on understanding participants’ perceptions and meaning-making related to the research phenomenon in the specific context being examined, emphasising the meanings that people attach to their experiences and actions within their lived context. By adopting this paradigm, the researchers aimed to obtain rich and nuanced insights into the participants’ perspectives, aligning with the insider’s perspective highlighted by Hennink *et al.* (2020). This approach is particularly suited to exploring teachers’ professional autonomy and agency in their professional learning, as it allows for a deep understanding of the complex factors shaping their experiences and decision-making processes. Utilising a modified theoretical framework inspired by Sachs (2001, 2016) discourses on managerial and democratic professionalism, the study offers an in-depth look at teachers’ agency, organisational dynamics, and democratic practices in PL.

Data source

In this study, we collected data from three sources (Figure 3). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders. Meanwhile, the secondary data comprised national and state documents related to teachers’ professional learning.

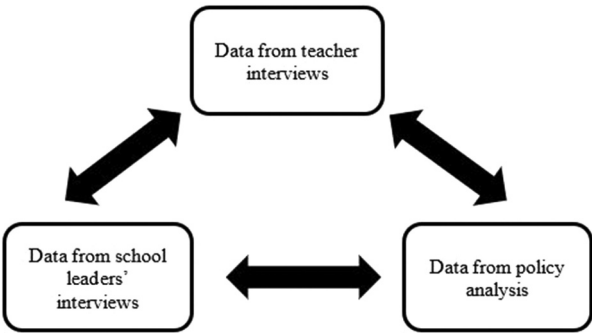


Figure 3. Data sources for this study.

Participants

Conducted in Greater Adelaide, South Australia, this study began by emailing 55 school principals from both government and non-government schools, asking them to circulate the study invitation to their teachers. Only five principals, with a 9% response rate, agreed and passed on the invitation. As a result, interviews were held with five principals and ten teachers. Table 1 details the invited participants and those who participated.

Table 1. Summary of approached schools and interviewed participants.

Number of schools approached		Interviewed principals					Interviewed teachers			
Government	Non-government	Government		Non-government			Government		Non-government	
23	32	P	S	P	S	C	P	S	P	S
Total: 55		2	1	0		2	4	3	0	3
		5					10			

P: Primary school S: Secondary school C: Combined school.

Data collection and analysis

Participants underwent semi-structured face-to-face or on-line interviews based on their preferences. Teacher interviews averaged 30 minutes, while school leader interviews were around 50 minutes. Key questions included:

- (1) How do you choose the professional learning you want to participate in?
- (2) When deciding about your professional learning, what factors influenced your decision?

We strategically avoided direct questions about participants' autonomy and decision-making in their professional learning to reduce potential social desirability bias. This indirect approach facilitated a more open conversation, providing a nuanced perspective on their involvement in PL.

We employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyse data from policies, documents, and interviews with school leaders and teachers. Using an inductive approach, we ensured that our analysis closely reflected participants' perspectives. This method was instrumental in exploring the intricate layers within the data, revealing the complexities of teachers' decision-making and agency in their PL.

While the study adopted an inductive analysis, avoiding a predefined codebook to reduce biases, it is essential to recognise the influence of the researchers' engagement with the literature. Their familiarity with related literature subtly informed the coding process and offered context to the emerging themes. The combined approach enhanced the analysis's depth, ensuring themes were contextually rooted and genuinely reflected participants' experiences in professional learning decision-making and agency.

Limitations

This research offers key insights into teachers' perspectives regarding their professional autonomy and agency in their professional learning, yet there are some limitations. The study's small sample of five principals and ten teachers could affect the generalisability of results. A larger, more diverse sample might yield a richer understanding. Also, the reliance on interview-based self-reported data might introduce social desirability bias. Despite efforts to foster an open interview environment, it is essential to recognise this potential influence.

Findings

Teachers' agency and decision-making in choosing professional learning activities

In this study, we observed significant variations in teachers' agency and decision-making regarding professional learning activities influenced by the nature of the learning. These differences were evident across three main categories.

- (1) School-provided professional learning activities
- (2) Self-initiated and external professional learning
- (3) Mandatory professional learning

School-provided professional learning activities

Teachers conveyed that, while schools frequently offer a range of PL opportunities, their influence over these activities often feels restricted. Jaida noted: 'The ones that the school puts on, you don't always get a lot of voice into what professional learning is happening.'

The challenges teachers highlighted included:

- Lack of personalisation of activities that are strongly suggested or required by the school to align with the school's priorities: Selena explained: 'Sometimes strongly suggested or

a requirement, but yes, sometimes just, this might be good for you.’ While some PL activities are advocated or mandated by superiors, they might not consistently align with an individual teacher’s needs or interests. As a result, teachers may feel their input is disregarded, leading to a sense of limited influence on their PL.

- Limited voice in expressing preferences for professional learning: The prevailing sentiment among teachers is the top-down approach to decision-making often excludes them from the planning and structuring process. The overall sentiment conveyed is one of limited autonomy and a disconnect between the expressed needs of teachers and the decisions made at higher administrative levels. Teachers described a culture where professional learning tends to be more about imparting information rather than genuinely integrating their perspectives. There is a distinct absence of avenues for them to share feedback or ideas, especially during sessions that revolve around school data and fixed agendas. Derek insightfully explained this approach by highlighting the overarching tendency for decision-making to follow a top-down model, limiting teachers’ involvement in shaping their PL:

Well, I haven’t really seen teachers having a voice saying this is what we need; this is what we want. It’s very much a principal saying this is what the department wants you to do. So, this is what we’re going to do, or a lot come down to also the Education Department will fund certain things that I want them to implement. So, for instance, the Berry Street program is a program that looks at self-regulation in students and things like that. So, it’s a very big push throughout our state in government schools to implement it. And so, the department will pay money to have people come and actually teach you. So, it doesn’t come out of your budget. And so, it’s pretty much saying, this is what you’re going to do. There’s a lot of you [are] just told what you’re going to do. Principals pretty much decide this is what we are going to focus on. It might be focusing on the things that you need to be do[ing]. So, it’s not something that teachers at the beginning of the year will be saying like, well, what professional development do you need?

- Whole-staff professional learning days: These events, organised by schools, typically feature predetermined topics. While they aim to foster collective learning, they often overlook the diverse needs of individual teachers. Many teachers felt compelled to participate in activities that might not align with their specific subjects or pedagogical methods, constraining their influence over their PL. As Jemma articulated, ‘If we do have full days, there is a choice into what activities you’re looking into. But the school’s leadership still decide the overall professional learning focus.’ Jaida explained:

But then if we do have the full staff days, sometimes school a lot of the time of full staff pupil free days, there is choice into what activities you’re looking into. But the focus is always the same. Really overarching, is always the same. Of these three different choices where are you going?

Self-initiated and external professional learning

In this category, teachers experience heightened autonomy in choosing their learning paths compared to other types of PL. Therefore, they proactively explore activities aligned with their interests and needs. Despite this autonomy, the level of support and resources available can still play a significant role, especially regarding the affordability of programmes and their timing. Selena elaborated on this: ‘Especially if the activities are outside school hours or are cost-effective, the school is supportive. But for more time-consuming or expensive programmes, decisions often involve discussions with leadership.’ Derek echoed this sentiment: ‘Teachers certainly have more say in their professional development when it’s on their own time and outside the school setting.’

Challenges persist, however, especially when aligning personal learning choices with formal registration requirements. As Jaden mentioned, ‘The Teacher Registration Board’s criteria can be restrictive. For instance, a day in the classroom might be immensely educational for me, but it doesn’t count as “external” professional development, which is frustrating.’ Securing support for their chosen activities also requires teachers to communicate their values effectively. As Leo put it, ‘You have to justify the relevance of the activity, articulate its potential benefits, and be prepared to share your insights upon completion.’

Mandatory professional learning

Mandatory professional learning pertains to obligatory activities or sessions teachers must attend during their employment, typically set by school or district administrations. Teachers highlighted the following challenges with such requirements:

Restriction in topic selection: Teachers frequently noted a lack of autonomy in selecting the focus of their professional learning due to predetermined mandates. Jaida illustrated this concern: ‘certain leadership decides the school’s needs. If the topic is cultural awareness or trauma-informed practice, it’s set for everyone, leaving no room for choice, yet we are expected to engage actively.’ Elena articulated her discontent with certain PL activities mandated by the Department for Education. Implicitly, she illustrated her perception of the top-down approach by drawing a parallel with my background (Author a), saying: ‘I don’t like some boring, some department interpret. You know what I’m saying? You come from . . . You know what I’m talking about.’

Repetitiveness in content: Another concern raised was the recurring nature of some mandatory sessions, with schools or districts revisiting the same topics year after year without introducing fresh content. Julia expressed her frustration: ‘The themes are constantly repeated. Everywhere I’ve worked, it’s essentially the same content.’

Key factors influencing teachers’ agency and decision-making in professional learning

The study reveals that teachers’ agency in their professional learning is influenced by four key actors: school leadership, policies, organisations (schools and Department for Education), and teachers themselves.

School leadership

Teachers reported the varying degrees of leaders’ involvement and decision-making power in shaping professional learning opportunities, shedding light on the different schools’ dynamics and approaches. From providing recommendations and guidance to offering support and resources, leaders influence teachers’ choices and experiences in their professional learning. Leaders often suggest or recommend specific professional learning activities based on their perception of teachers’ needs, role, responsibilities or the school’s priorities. These recommendations can range from informal suggestions to more robust ones or mandates. Selena stated:

And then our bigger boss or the head of teaching and learning or the director of teaching and learning, she’s the one who often suggests things as well, based on what she knows about your role or what you’re doing and the direction that you’re heading.

While some teachers acknowledged leaders’ input, they reported some challenges. One significant challenge associated with leaders’ involvement is the decision-making power held by the leadership team. As Jaida expressed, ‘The leadership makes the decision on behalf of the workers as to what’s important.’ This highlights a potential limitation of this approach in contrast to a collaborative one, where the determination of professional learning needs and the choice of professional learning activities are primarily driven by the perspectives and priorities of the leadership team rather than the teachers, as explained by Derek: ‘I think if I was a principal, I’d really to have a genuine interest in what people want to do and help.’ This can create a gap between teachers’ aspirations and interests and the professional learning opportunities suggested by the leadership team.

Some teachers highlighted a challenge related to leadership input in their professional development plan, typically created with the principal. They mentioned that, while the plan provides an opportunity to articulate their focus and goals for the future, the options for goal selection are predominantly aligned with the school’s agenda rather than their personal and professional aspirations. Some teachers expressed a lack of interest from their principal regarding pursuing

a higher degree and its potential contribution to the school. Teachers perceive that school leaders tend to prioritise their own agenda instead of actively supporting and encouraging teachers' individual goals and professional learning.

Furthermore, the cost or duration of professional learning opportunities often requires the involvement and approval of school leaders. This situation can hinder teachers from exploring specific professional development paths beneficial to their teaching practices. As Selena explained:

If it's a longer one or more expensive one, obviously other people are involved in the decision, and sometimes it might be discussed with your leaders, and they might decide that, yes, you're the best to go, or it might be someone else who's going to benefit more from that and come back and share.

Factors considered by school leaders to guide teachers' professional learning choices: Interviews with school leaders provided insights into the factors they consider when guiding teachers' PL choices as illustrated in Table 2. The discussions shed light on the processes underlying teacher decision-making, the level of teacher involvement in these processes, and the weight given to their inputs in shaping professional learning experiences.

Table 2. Factors considered by school leaders to guide teachers' professional learning choices.

Categories	Specific factors
School-related factors	School strategic plan
	Data-driven approach
	Leadership team input
	School culture
	School's organisational structure
Student-centred factors	Resources (funds, relief teachers, time)
	Students' learning needs
	Students' other needs: wellbeing, cultural considerations
Teachers' input	Teachers' feedback and input through PDPs

School leaders highlighted the strategic plan and data analysis as primary drivers when guiding teachers' professional learning strategies. School leaders mentioned that they consider teachers' feedback in this process. James explained:

So, we decide on where we're going with our training, according to our strategic plan, that first of all, the most important thing is what is the strategic plan telling us we've got to achieve. But secondly, we do a, what we call a professional development review each year with each of our members of staff and we get feedback.

David stated:

The leadership team put [professional learning] together. We also ask for feedback from staff about [it]. We certainly ask for feedback from staff on how they felt, you know, after each term, how that has been. And any suggestions that they would make, any gaps in the learning that we didn't cover that [they] would like to be covered.

Also, Diane explained:

Well, the whole leadership team would be involved. So that allows us to be responsive to what the needs of people. All the leaders are involved in designing it. So, there are certain things that get mapped out in that and then it goes to that leadership team. So, it's negotiated with the whole leadership team.

Leaders also emphasised a data-driven approach to pinpoint areas that need improvement. Mark stated:

That analysis of the data and that the right data we had, you know, in education we have so much data and some of it is useless. So, it's identifying what's most important, analysing that and that will direct the areas that we need to learn. Another thing is, I suppose, to decide what can we afford? Because the budget is very limited. So, we need to make those business decisions of getting the best value for money.

Leaders acknowledged the constraints of limited school resources, with budget considerations taking centre stage in their guidance, as Mark explained. In their view, it is essential to ensure equitable access to PL opportunities, especially given the operational impacts of teacher absences, and to uphold a sense of fairness, as Diane explained:

The biggest cost for the school is for people to be out of the school for the day. So, if it's like that discipline-specific stuff or something they just want to do when it's taking time out of school, we have to be a bit more thoughtful about how we're being equitable about that and what the impact on the school is. So, for example, at the moment it's really hard for us to allow people to be out of the school because it's, we're having a tough time covering classes with so many illnesses [COVID-19] at the moment.

Furthermore, school leaders believe a school's size and structural framework significantly influence their guidance. In larger schools, there may be a greater likelihood of top-down decisions, which may not always resonate with individual teachers' preferences. Leaders underscored that school culture and effective communication are central factors. Samantha provided valuable insight into this aspect: 'This school is part of a much bigger school, the one in Adelaide, and I had to get approval for pretty much everything from the boss in another city.' She continues: 'Samantha provided a nuanced view of the issue:

Because of the fairly toxic culture in the school, some teachers don't trust enough to come and talk to me.'

Policies

Teachers noted that requirements imposed by policies can limit their professional autonomy and agency in addressing their professional learning needs effectively. Teachers expressed frustration with the Education Department's top-down approach, where principals are tasked with fulfilling prescribed requirements without much consideration for teachers' input or preferences. Kaitlyn stated: 'Some teachers just do ones that don't really seem relevant to them and are easy just to build their hours. It's kind of like, do you do something just to tick off the boxes?'

While teachers may have some voice if they assert their agenda to their principals, there is a limited collective influence. Teachers highlighted the following challenges related to documentation requirements:

- Challenges in providing evidence. An obstacle with documentation is evidencing professional learning activities not directly aligned with external requirements. Teachers mentioned that they often engage in valuable activities that do not necessarily conform to external requirements. Demonstrating how these contribute to development proves challenging. Some struggle to show the relevance and impact of these activities, causing frustration and undervaluation of diverse learning experiences.
- Justification and alignment with school goals. Teachers must often justify their proposed professional learning activities' significance and potential impact on school improvement. This process is time consuming. Teachers must articulate how these activities align with school goals, enhance students' learning outcomes, and contribute to personal and professional growth.
- Excluding classroom-based and some informal learning. Another challenge arises when teachers cannot document classroom-based and informal learning experiences, such as mentoring, which the Teachers Registration Board does not recognise. Teachers frequently engage in these valuable experiences, including classroom learning and discussions with colleagues. Jaden explained:

I might not be able to have everything documented or deemed professional learning from what I'm doing, which can be very frustrating because you might have come a long way with knowledge, understanding and developing your teaching, but it may not be within that 60 hours. I would say probably, that's a requirement to maintain registration, but whether or not that's useful is another story.

How do policies influence teachers' agency? Insight from policy analysis

This study utilised a participant-driven policy analysis approach to collect and assess participants' perspectives for the analysis. The analysis drew from three key sources: 1) an extensive literature review, 2) teachers' first-hand views on these policies, and 3) insights from school leaders regarding their interpretations and implementations of these policies. These components offered a multifaceted view of PL policy effects on teacher agency, focusing on two main concepts:

- (1) The dominance of accountability over teachers' professional autonomy and agency
- (2) Overemphasising the use of policy in guiding professional learning rather than recognising teachers' expertise.

The dominance of accountability over teacher agency

Table 3. Multi-dimensional insights into policy influence on teacher agency in professional learning: the dominance of accountability.

Data source	Findings
APST	Improving teacher quality instead of teaching quality
TRBSA	The lack of assurance regarding system-level support Mandatory hours Recording requirements and supporting evidence
Teachers' perceptions of policies	The challenge of balancing policy requirements with other responsibilities in APST Mandated hours in TRBSA policy Documentation requirements in policies
Leaders' perceptions of policies	The challenge of comprehensive assessment of teachers against standards A judgemental approach in using standards instead of a supportive one due to a lack of training for leaders

The concept of accountability is a prominent force shaping teachers' professional learning within related policies, specifically APST and TRBSA, as illustrated in Table 3. Shamir (2008), calling it responsabilisation, discussed that this notion involves placing teachers at the forefront of accountability for outcomes beyond their direct control, such as students' achievements and overall school advancement. The APST objectives focus on teacher quality rather than teaching quality, implying a deliberate shift towards accountability by focusing on individual teachers' capabilities and their impact on educational outcomes. This shift, however, neglects the broader systemic factors that influence education. While the APST acknowledges teachers' significance, it simultaneously places them solely accountable for outcomes, disregarding the multifaceted influences within education's complex landscape. This duality creates an imbalance between recognition of teachers' expertise and the burdensome accountability placed on them, an issue exacerbated by the nuanced interplay between professional autonomy and agency and institutional expectations.

Turning to teachers' perceptions of policies, teachers' interviews further highlighted the dominance of accountability over teachers' professional autonomy and agency in education policies. Jaden's perspective underscores the tension between standardised policy demands and individual career trajectories: 'There's a lot of challenges that come with the job, and some days will be easy, some days will be more difficult. So, I wouldn't hold myself too highly against those standards too often.' Abigail noted: 'There's quite a lot of them for us. We are so busy all the time. It's just too many of them [compliance requirements] to keep track of.'

This emphasis is echoed in the requirement to adhere to mandated hours as outlined in the TRBSA policy. Teachers underscored the need for consistent tracking and documentation, revealing the complex interplay between accountability and teachers’ professional autonomy and agency within policy frameworks.

Although the TRBSA professional learning policy aims to balance accountability and teachers’ professional autonomy and agency, the dominance of accountability over teachers’ professional autonomy and agency becomes further evident through teachers’ views. This is exemplified by the policy’s absence of explicit assurance regarding system-level support, implying that teachers undertake primary responsibility for their own professional learning. Moreover, the mandatory requirement for 100 hours of professional learning within five years underscores the prescribed nature of the learning process, reinforcing the idea that teachers must conform to standardised expectations. The policy’s insistence on recording and providing evidence of professional learning activities further solidifies individual accountability, prioritising documentation over self-directed professional autonomy and agency.

Leaders’ interviews highlighted the challenge of comprehensively assessing teachers against the standards. These evaluations place teachers under pressure to meet externally defined criteria, potentially restricting their ability to adapt their teaching methods to their classroom dynamics and students’ needs. Additionally, the judgemental approach instead of a supportive one is evident through leaders’ concern about insufficient training for principals in assessment, as conveyed by Samantha: ‘There’s not enough training for supervisors and for principals on how they can use that [standard] to support teachers rather than to judge teachers.’

This approach suggests that inadequate training might hinder evaluators from fully understanding classroom nuances, potentially limiting teachers’ professional autonomy and agency due to assessment practices that do not align with their contexts.

Overemphasising the use of policy in guiding professional learning versus recognising teachers’ expertise

Table 4. Multi-dimensional insights into policy influence on teacher agency in professional learning: the dominance of policy over teachers’ expertise.

Data source	Findings
APST	Focus Area 6.1: Overemphasis on APST to guide professional learning and undermining trust in the teaching profession’s capacity to shape educational excellence Focus Area 6.2: Prescriptive language and overlooking teachers’ agency. Imbalance between providing guidance and fostering teachers’ agency
TRBSA	Acceptable activities: a detailed list of acceptable PL/D activities along with the type of evidence required Referencing standards Quantifiable expectations and mandatory courses
Teachers’ perceptions of policies	Ignorance of teachers’ experience and intrinsic understanding in APST Not accepting mentoring or some valuable classroom learning in the list The challenge of referencing standards Recognising outsiders’ inputs more than teachers’ opinions Quantifiable expectations and mandatory courses
Leaders’ perceptions of policies	The challenge of finding an equilibrium between policy-guided professional learning and recognising teachers’ expertise Alignment of PDPs with school aspirations that correspond to teacher standards

As summarised in Table 4, within the APST, standard 6 highlights the need for teachers to enhance their practice through professional learning. Nevertheless, its strong emphasis on strict adherence to the APST framework might eclipse teachers’ unique expertise. A specific concern is how such emphasis could curtail teachers’ professional autonomy and agency. For example, Focus Area 6.1 encourages teachers to frame their learning needs through the APST lens across different career

stages. While this is presented as guidance, this continual push towards APST may inadvertently confine teachers, leading to questions about educational leaders' genuine trust in teachers' ability to take ownership of their learning.

The decline in teachers' professional autonomy and agency within APST Standard 6 is evident in the language used in its descriptors, especially regarding teachers' involvement in professional learning. The wording in Focus Area 6.2 suggests a prescriptive tone. For example, the directive for teachers to 'participate in learning to update knowledge and practice, targeted to professional needs and school and/or system priorities' seems to prioritise external factors over the inherent expertise and interests of teachers.

The teachers' interviews provide robust evidence of a notable limitation embedded within the APST. This constraint revolves around overseeing teachers' experiential expertise and innate understanding. Leo's remark when asked about the APST – 'I automatically understand the important aspects of being a teacher' – suggests a possible omission of their nuanced insights. Jaden's perspective hints at a potential inadvertent discouragement of valuable classroom learning and mentoring, which might not find explicit recognition within the standards:

I think TRB, it's external from your work site, so it's not during what you're doing. So, I couldn't use a day in the classroom as professional development, even though I might have learned that whole bunch of stuff. It has to be external, which becomes very frustrating.

Julia's observation that 'as an experienced teacher, it's almost innate that those activities are covering those standards anyway' underscores that, for adept practitioners, referencing standards might be essential due to their intrinsic alignment with best practices. Jaida's remark that the standards become less relevant for experienced teachers implies the risk of external viewpoints overshadowing teachers' well-rounded perspectives, possibly sidelining their contextualised opinions. While the APST is seen as valuable for newer teachers, many experienced teachers do not find it central to their practice. A recurring theme is that standards may not always encourage deeper, meaningful professional engagement. Instead, they might inadvertently promote a 'tick-box' mentality. Some view linking professional learning to standards as tedious and not pivotal to their improvement.

The interview data reveals a tension between policy guidelines and teachers' experiences. Selena noted the superficial nature of such standards: 'I don't necessarily think it really encourages people to go and do professional learning.' Jemma doesn't rely on them for self-evaluation, and Jaden views them as mere formalities, prioritising feedback from students and parents. Leo straightforwardly stated that he found the standards unhelpful. These perspectives question the true utility of policies in fostering meaningful professional growth, suggesting the need for a shift towards valuing teachers' expertise.

Analysis of the TRBSA's professional learning document provides compelling evidence substantiating that education policy contains an excessive emphasis on policy guidance over recognising teachers' expertise. Firstly, the document prominently outlines procedural compliance and policy adherence as the primary markers of effective professional learning, potentially overshadowing the diverse expertise and innovative practices that teachers bring to the table. Secondly, the document's conspicuous silence on tapping into teachers' intrinsic insights and experiential wisdom underscores a potential oversight of their valuable contributions to enriching professional learning initiatives. These findings underscore the policy's tendency to prioritise policy-driven frameworks at the expense of harnessing and integrating teachers' invaluable expertise.

Our data shows that standards and policies are favoured tools for school leaders. Nevertheless, this inclination inadvertently overemphasises policy-driven professional learning, potentially overshadowing the acknowledgement of teachers' expertise. This imbalance is illuminated through two primary themes emerging from leaders' interviews: the challenge of achieving equilibrium between policy-guided learning and recognising teachers' expertise, as

exemplified by aligning professional development plans with school aspirations, and alignment with institutional aspirations, which, while reflecting institutional goals, can contribute to the dominance of policy-driven growth. Diane noted: ‘They have to match those to our school aspirations and say, this is a goal I’m working on’.

Organisations: climate and support

The organisational climate and support in the form of funds and time release is another factor that consistently emerged from the data and significantly affects teachers’ professional autonomy and agency. Organisational culture not only directly impacts teachers’ professional autonomy and agency but also exerts influence through leaders’ agency, as elucidated by Samantha (see ‘School leadership’ above).

Elena expressed frustration with decision-makers in education who lack recent school experience. She criticised them for treating her as an experiment and emphasised the need for a collaborative approach. Elena noted a disconnect between the department and teachers, leading to many colleagues leaving due to these challenges:

Some of them have never been into school for ages. And, you know, don’t treat us as guinea pigs. We should be in it together. We should be in it together. But that’s a big windy, big kind of get a cranking in the department. They [are] kind of lagging behind us in a way. And, you know, all the people I know and most of them have left now.

Although funds and time release were discussed as a potential barrier in previous sections, it is worth discussing it comprehensively here due to its prominence in teachers’ accounts. Support from the organisation regarding funds and time release emerged as a critical factor shaping teachers’ capacity to navigate their learning, impacting their decision-making power and professional agency. The combination of insufficient funds and limited time release establishes a barrier that prevents teachers from fully engaging in their preferred professional learning activities and limits their influence on directing their learning experiences, as teachers in this study discussed.

Teachers explained that, when schools provide limited financial resources, teachers may feel compelled to opt for more affordable or free options, limiting their ability to explore more specialised or comprehensive training opportunities. Similarly, the lack of dedicated time off can further hinder teachers’ decision-making, as it restricts their ability to participate in longer or more intensive professional learning experiences that require extended periods away from their regular teaching responsibilities.

Securing funds for professional learning is not always a challenge. The experiences shared by teachers showcase a variety of scenarios, with some individuals noting positive experiences of obtaining financial resources for their professional learning. As Kaitlyn mentioned: ‘I think if there’s something that I need or I feel like I need this if I have a chat with a leader, I’m confident that they will work something out so I can do it, which is good.’

Teachers

Participants consistently highlighted their role as crucial actors in the context of teacher agency in their PL. As previously discussed earlier, they indicated various barriers supporting or hindering their ability to exercise agency. We further explored and identified the specific factors teachers consider when selecting PL activities. The comprehensive findings are summarised in [Table 5](#).

Student-centred considerations are paramount in guiding teachers’ choices for professional learning. Teachers focus on enhancing students’ outcomes, basing decisions on observed needs, feedback and foundational knowledge about their students. They utilise classroom data, including formative evaluations and performance indicators, to customise learning experiences.

Table 5. Considerations guiding teachers' professional learning choices.

Categories	Specific considerations
Student-centred	Relevance to students' current and future needs Relevance to students' issues and problems, especially students with special needs Result-oriented approach: considering the impact on students' learning outcomes
School-related factors	Relevance to the school improvement plan Relevance to teachers' professional development plans Availability of resources and support from the school and leaders
Compliance with regulations	Relevance to standards Strong recommendations from school leadership Compulsory professional learning
Teachers as professionals or individuals	Relevance to teachers' interests and needs Relevance to teachers' career progress
Professional learning activity and provider	Long-term support and sustainability Peer-reviewed: feedback from teachers and school leaders Quality and credibility of the professional learning opportunity Differentiation and personalisation Result-oriented approach: considering the immediacy of application Collaboration and networking opportunities Logistics: availability, duration, timing, flexibility, convenience and cost

Factors like the school improvement plan and alignment with professional learning objectives come into play in the school environment. These considerations often mean teachers' development aligns more with collective school goals than individual growth. Moreover, adhering to established standards and mandatory learning domains is crucial, especially when solid school leadership recommendations underscore these.

When assessing potential learning activities, teachers emphasise several criteria: long-term support, sustainability, quality, differentiation, adaptability to individual needs and immediate relevance. They value practical, hands-on experiences, opportunities for networking and insights from seasoned teachers. Moreover, logistical factors such as timing, cost and peer endorsements frequently influence their final decisions.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand teachers' perceived agency and decision-making in their professional learning, with data triangulation through interviews with classroom teachers and school leaders. Simultaneously, policy analysis uncovered how policies shape teachers' agency in their PL. Data analysis operated within the framework of Sachs' concepts of managerial and democratic professionalism.

We examined teachers' professional autonomy and agency in professional learning, exploring the various factors that contribute to shaping this agency. The analysis of data using a checklist crafted by the researchers (Table 6) led to the conclusion that teachers' professional learning often lacks genuine input from teachers themselves, even in school-based professional learning activities that are ostensibly designed to be owned and shaped by teachers.

Whether explicitly labelled as such or not, a significant portion of school-based PL activities is grounded in the promising concept of PLCs. PLCs embody the idea that groups of teachers regularly come together, engaging in systematic and prolonged cycles of inquiry-based learning to nurture individual and collective teaching capacities, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes (Stoll *et al.* 2006, as cited in Brodie, 2021; Katz *et al.* 2009; Hairon *et al.* 2017). However, despite the intention of following best practices, there is an intriguing illusion surrounding these practices, one that policymakers and educational leaders aspire to create. In reality, a notable disconnect emerges from the teachers' narratives in this study, revealing a disparity between the envisioned benefits of PLCs and teachers' actual experiences and desires. The potential advantage of PLCs, particularly in developing professional agency and identities,

Table 6. Professional learning autonomy and agency assessment checklist.

Aspects	Question
Mandated professional learning requirements	Are teachers required to fulfil mandated professional learning hours or specific types of professional learning activities?
Participation autonomy	Can teachers decide whether to participate in a specific activity or not?
Activity designation autonomy	Do teachers have the autonomy to designate certain activities as part of their professional learning?
Timing autonomy	Can teachers determine when they engage in professional learning?
Format and structure autonomy	Do teachers have a say in the format or structure of their professional learning activities, whether they are through conferences, workshops, reading or participation in professional learning communities?
Content selection autonomy	Are teachers involved in choosing the content or topics of their professional learning?
Goal-setting autonomy	To what extent can teachers set their own learning goals within the professional learning framework?
Resource access autonomy	Do teachers have autonomy in accessing resources for their professional learning?
Collaborative decision-making	To what extent are teachers involved in collaborative decision-making processes regarding the selection, design or evaluation of professional learning initiatives?
Feedback provision	Can teachers provide feedback on the effectiveness of professional learning activities, influencing future offerings?
Adaptation autonomy	Are teachers allowed to adapt or customise learning materials to better suit their specific classroom needs?

underscored by Darling-Hammond and Sykes (1999) as the key driver of PLCs, is not consistently echoed in the experiences shared by the participating teachers. This gap beckons for a deeper investigation into the actual implementation and reception of these PLC-inspired activities within schools.

While the concept of school-based PL is empirically supported and inherently attractive, the superficial implementation that neglects its multidimensional nature – specifically, the dimensions of ‘community’, ‘learning’, and ‘professional’ as highlighted by Hairon *et al.* (2017)—can compromise its effectiveness and potential benefits. Here, we will argue that as supported by the findings of this study- the neglect of teachers’ input and influence on school-based PL, the dimension of ‘professional’ has been overlooked. We believe that in professional learning, professionalism is teachers’ agentic qualities that empower them and allow them to construct their knowledge and engage proactively in their in-service education, as underscored by Sachs (2016). Furthermore, our findings reveal that some features of the five key characteristics of successful PLCs – focus, long-term inquiry, collaboration, leadership support, and trust (Vescio *et al.* 2008, as cited in Brodie 2021; Stoll and Louis 2008a; Katz *et al.* 2009; Vangrieken *et al.* 2017) – appears to counteract the empowerment of teacher agency, as highlighted by the participants in this study. Specifically, teachers in this research challenged the notion of ‘leadership support’, which, in their experience, has been redefined as a form of control rather than genuinely supporting teacher agency. Moreover, data from school leaders also raised questions regarding the concepts of collaboration, potentially undermining the ‘community’ dimension of PLCs. If the ‘community’ and ‘professional’ dimensions of PLCs are lacking, the essential ‘learning’ dimension inevitably remains unattained.

This study demonstrates that teachers take into account a diverse set of considerations when choosing their professional learning activities, as outlined in Table 5. These results align with Heckathorn and Dotger (2023) study. Moreover, our findings further emphasise that teachers possess the intrinsic capacity for what Sachs (2001) defines as ‘democratic professionalism’.

Given the opportunity, teachers have the capability to manage their learning in a way that benefits the entire educational community. This potential can be more fully achieved if education systems and leaders remove unnecessary barriers that hinder teachers from exercising their agency.

Revisiting our theoretical framework (Figure 1), when teachers are not fully empowered to act as ‘professional learners: active decision-makers and ‘democratic professionals’, professional learning seems less promising and potentially lacks meaningful and impactful outcomes.

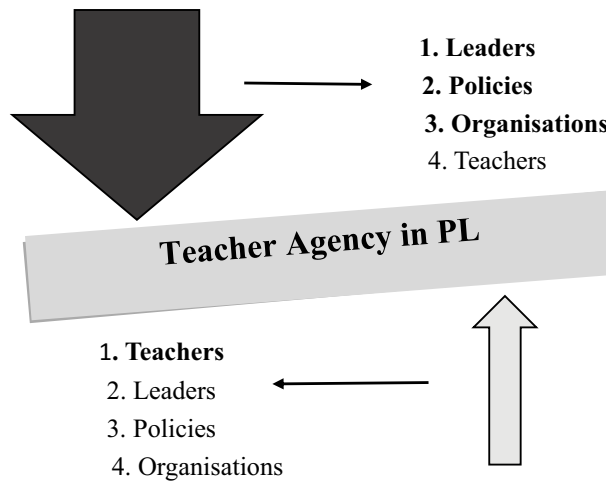


Figure 4. Key factors in shaping teachers' agency in their PL.

Our findings indicate that policies, school leaders, organisations in this study, such as schools and the Department for Education in SA, along with classroom teachers are the primary drivers shaping teachers' agency and decision-making in professional learning (Figure 4). A harmonious balance among these three actors fosters a well-rounded teacher agency (Figure 4). Our findings further reveal that, in the present situation, this desired balance remains elusive due to reasons, such as rigid policy frameworks, top-down leadership approaches, and a lack of active teacher involvement in decision-making processes. Our findings resonate with the insights of Mockler (2020), who highlighted that regimes of teacher professional standards can reshape teacher professional learning by promoting a specific version of teacher professionalism. This is evident through the structures and practices that link professional standards and accreditation to professional learning.

Research has extensively shown that school leaders play a pivotal role in enhancing teacher agency, emphasising the importance of teacher participation in professional learning communities for effective teaching (Sun and Leithwood 2015, Hallinger *et al.* 2017). Additionally, transformational leadership is the ideal model to boost school and teacher agency, increasing teacher engagement and dedication (Sun and Leithwood 2015). Our study is consistent with these findings, asserting that school leaders profoundly influence teacher agency within their professional learning; however, our research reveals a gap between this ideal and the reality in the schools found in the study. Navigating the intricate balance between meeting superiors' expectations in a data-driven educational setting and adhering to policies proves challenging for many leaders. Their struggle can be attributed to several factors. The constant pressure to produce quantifiable results can overshadow the qualitative nuances of effective professional learning.

Additionally, the rapidly evolving educational policies often leave little room for flexibility, and the ever-present scrutiny can deter leaders from deviating from the prescribed path, even if it might benefit their educators and students. Our findings indicate that school leaders often overlook and neglect contextual factors in teacher professional learning, which might lead to less individualised development opportunities. Additionally, there is a preference for a top-down approach to policy interpretation, potentially limiting teachers relegating them to more passive roles in the learning process. The decision-making process also lacks inclusivity; the input of teachers is not consistently sought or valued, leading to a diminished sense of shared ownership and collective agency.

Our findings emphasise that teachers are key actors in shaping their agency in professional learning. As Biesta *et al.* (2015) suggests, teachers' agency is influenced not just by their attributes, but also by their professional experience. In examining the intertwined relationship between teacher agency and professional learning, it is clear that challenges in

one can potentially hinder the effectiveness of the other. A significant barrier for many teachers is the varied and sometimes conflicting educational messages within schools. Often, these mixed messages have roots in changes introduced from outside the educational community, resulting in a void of clear guiding philosophy. This absence leaves teachers unsure about their roles and contributions (Biesta *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, our study reveals a nuance: while teachers recognise their theoretical role in professional learning, the prescriptive nature of specific policies and expectations causes some confusion. This situation often leads them to question how they can truly take the reins of their professional learning (as illustrated in our proposed framework in Figure 2). In the context of teachers working with students with special needs who confront unique challenges and complexities in their teaching practices, it is crucial to consider how these challenges may exacerbate the confusion regarding professional learning. One compelling viewpoint emerges from a teacher who, trusting their expertise and judgement, suggests that their classroom activities in these situations should be considered valuable professional learning experiences.

Incorporating insights from Evans (2014), we must broaden our understanding of professional learning, recognising that it extends beyond designated or planned activities such as workshops or courses. Professional learning may occur incidentally within the daily lives of teachers, including their interactions with diverse stimuli, which can stimulate ideas leading to enhanced professionalism. This perspective aligns with trusting teachers' judgement when considering their classroom activities as valuable components of professional learning in supporting students.

This teacher's insightful perspective also highlights the dynamic nature of teaching students with special needs, requiring continuous adaptation and innovation. Trusting teachers' expertise and intimate knowledge of their students leads us to question whether these classroom activities should be considered professional learning. If not, why? Considering that even in the OECD (2009) report (p. 57), 'Informal dialogue to improve teaching' is predominantly recognised as a central professional learning activity with a high teacher participation rate, this raises an intriguing question. The answer to this question could offer valuable insights into recognising and validating teachers' experiences in unique educational settings, informing the ongoing discourse on professional learning in such contexts.

Are things as bad as they seem regarding teachers' professional autonomy and agency in professional learning?

Returning to the interview data shared in findings section of this article, teachers consistently reported limitations in how administrators, organisations and policies allow them to enact agency as they engage in required professional learning programmes. These limitations, as discussed in various aspects of the checklist, contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges teachers face in exercising professional autonomy and agency in their professional learning experiences.

One of the most basic aspects of the checklist, timing, draws attention to teachers' lack of autonomy in fundamental decision-making processes, as exemplified by the question: 'Can teachers determine when they engage in professional learning?' The responses from teachers shed light on the structural constraints and limited flexibility imposed by mandatory professional learning sessions.

Highlighting the structured nature of professional learning sessions, teachers provided the following insights during interviews: Selena:

we have every month off most Mondays, here we have some sort of professional learning, more staff meeting with generally all the teaching staff. And then there's some of them, the Monday afternoon ones, for example, are compulsory. So, we all do those.

Jemma: 'We undertake professional learning every week, so Mondays after school for an hour and a half is put aside for us to do scheduled meetings or workshops on various subjects.'

Julia:

We do professional learning here on a regular basis because the school is structured, oh, possibly two or three times a week, because we have our meetings prior in the mornings before the students start. And so, some of those sessions are professional development.

Jaida: 'In our morning meetings, I'd say probably once a month.' Derek: 'So, there is once a week staff meeting where there will be some sort of professional focus, usually for about an hour a week at school.'

The regular day professional learning sessions, especially if they are mandatory staff meetings, can significantly impact teachers' professional autonomy and agency. The requirement to attend these sessions on a specific day introduces limitations on flexibility, as teachers may have reduced freedom to choose when to engage in professional learning. If these sessions are compulsory, teachers may find their autonomy constrained, as they have limited say in when it is most convenient or effective for them to participate in professional learning. Additionally, the set schedule on specific days creates structural constraints on teachers' time, potentially impeding their ability to schedule professional learning activities at times that better suit their individual needs or preferences. The fact that the institution organises these sessions on a regular basis implies a level of institutional control over the timing of professional learning. This suggests that teachers may have less influence in determining the overall schedule of these activities, highlighting potential challenges to their autonomy in this aspect of professional learning.

While we acknowledge that having a regular schedule could create a predictable routine for professional learning, making it easier for teachers to plan around these activities, the reported challenges and teachers' opinions about these sessions raise suspicions about the positive aspects.

Upon revisiting the entirety of the interviews and conducting a nuanced analysis, a discernible pattern emerged. It became evident that, while teachers might exert some autonomy in specific facets, they encounter substantial limitations in other crucial areas. This nuanced examination prompts the assertion that, if teachers have partial professional agency in one aspect, they invariably lack comprehensive professional autonomy and agency in other essential dimensions. This recognition underscores the intricate nature of teachers' professional autonomy and agency within the realm of professional learning, shedding light on the challenges and constraints teachers face in truly owning their professional learning.

In discussing the findings of our study, we have systematically analysed the data while considering patterns and insights derived from the emerging literature on teachers' professional autonomy and agency, such as the work of Priestley *et al.* (2015). Our conceptualisation of teachers' professional autonomy and agency in professional learning embraces a multidimensional construct, delineating agency over, during and emerging from professional learning experiences. Although the last dimension – professional autonomy and agency emerging from professional learning – is beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to note that, given the observed limitations in professional autonomy and agency over and during professional learning, the expectation is that the third dimension, professional autonomy and agency emerging from professional learning, is likely to be constrained or less pronounced. This logical inference aligns with the overarching theme of teachers' limited professional autonomy and agency discerned from the comprehensive examination of professional learning experiences shared by teachers in the study.

Implications and conclusion

This research explored the intricate dynamics of teachers' agency in their professional learning. While school-based professional learning offers a framework for cultivating a cohesive learning environment, discernible gaps emerge when contrasting the theory with teachers' lived experiences. These inconsistencies arise due to a surface-level engagement with the multifaceted nature of professional learning, particularly in downplaying the 'professional' aspect, which is paramount for genuine empowerment.

Our study unveils a multifaceted landscape wherein policies, school leadership, organisations, and teachers are the primary factors influencing teachers' sense of agency in their professional learning journey. A harmonised interplay among these primary elements is indispensable to ensure meaningful professional learning. However, the reality depicted in our findings signals a departure from this ideal interplay. Concurrently, teachers positioned at the core of this discourse find themselves navigating conflicting educational narratives and an environment that, at times, obscures their central role. Thus, the responsibility lies in achieving a delicate equilibrium that harmonises policies, leadership strategies, and teacher agency, ensuring that the immense potential of professional learning is fully realised in practice.

Considering our findings, should the focus not shift towards standardising the entire education system by establishing foundational standards tailored to the profession's demands rather than rigidly concentrating on standardising teachers? This question underscores the need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of professional learning paradigms, inviting a broader dialogue on enhancing the educational landscape.

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