

LEADING WITHIN LIMITS: PRIVATE SCHOOL HEADS' EXPERIENCES OF AUTONOMY, CONTROL, AND PROFESSIONAL CONFLICT

Sadia Yousaf<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Ayesha Afzal<sup>\*2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M Phil (ELM) Scholar, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>1</sup>mailforsadia8@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>ayeshaafzal@umt.edu.pk

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19332801>

**Keywords**

School autonomy, institutional constraints, school leadership, pedagogical creativity

**Article History**

Received: 31 January 2026

Accepted: 16 March 2026

Published: 30 March 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: \*

Dr. Ayesha Afzal

**Abstract**

This study intends to interpret the experiences of private school heads regarding school autonomy. This study used a phenomenological research design based on an interpretative approach. Purposive sampling was done to reach participants. The researcher collected data from eight school heads and teachers of private chain schools of Lahore, Pakistan. Thematic data analysis was done to draw codes. Overall analysis highlighted the experiences of private school heads regarding school autonomy. The extent of autonomy is different across schools and even across different domains within the same school. School heads are allowed administrative autonomy to a good extent. Pedagogical autonomy is partially practiced in schools and pedagogical creativity is compromised. Financial and personnel autonomy are recognized as the most limited and externally controlled areas. Budget and resource allocation decisions are made by external authorities. School heads play an advisory role as they put up the resource demands, while the provision of funds and resources is subject to approval from authorities. School heads' experiences indicate the emotional, professional, and value-based conflicts they face while exercising autonomy in schools. Transparent policies should be designed to explicitly define the extents of autonomy for school heads and teachers to seek psychological and professional stability. Future researchers may conduct a comparative analysis of autonomy in public and private schools to explore how governance structure influences autonomy.

**Introduction**

School heads play a vital role in the operational as well as instructional functioning of the school. The transformational role of school vision, implementation of external policies and teaching practices is managed by the school head. Other than the managerial role, school heads deal with the crucial act of decision-making and working on school reputation, satisfying stakeholders, improving school performance and enrollments, all adding up to expectations from them. Unlike public schools, an extra obligation falls on private school leaders that is to oversee the competition-

based reputational placement of schools in the market.

The role of the school head is evolving amid increasing intricacies in the educational setup (Shah et al., 2024; Kumar, 2025). The factors that have explicitly altered the expected role of school heads include reforms in education policy (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024), increased school autonomy (Gavin & Stacey, 2022), technological advancement, AI integration in instruction and assessments, and the urgency of external accountability. Role of school head has become an uphill battle that demands developing and

implementing strategic plans, monitoring curriculum implementation (Dool et al., 2024), managing resources (Rizada, 2025), professional development of teachers (Nawab & Quraishi, 2024), reshaping school culture, supporting emotional well-being of students and teachers (Reid, 2021), engaging the community (Proff et al., 2025), and distributing leadership responsibilities (Harris et al., 2022).

School autonomy gives school heads freedom of decision-making (Khan, 2023), curriculum planning (Nordholm et al., 2021) for improving school performance, staff recruitment (McKay, 2018), and directing funds (Kasa & Mhamed, 2023). It extends beyond the individual level and not only circumscribes the school heads, but also counts teachers and students as well (Mammadov & Schroeder, 2023; Soe et al., 2025). It is an institutional entity where all stakeholders participate in shaping the positive learning experiences. It is more closely associated with private rather than public schools (Polidano, 2022). However, in autonomous private schools, increased autonomy is perceived to increase workload and add more responsibilities for the school heads (Thompson et al., 2021; Niesche et al., 2021). This study intends to highlight perceptions and experiences of school heads in autonomous schools. This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of school heads and teachers regarding the school autonomy.

### **Problem Statement**

The school head is now expected to be a visionary, a change agent, and a key player in improving teaching and learning within the school (Kumar, 2025). Along with the necessity of adapting to evolving educational needs, school heads must mitigate (Stählkrantz & Rapp, 2022; Amani, 2025) the tension between external accountability and school autonomy. External accountability bodies seldom regard the individual differences of the schools (Watkins et al., 2020), whereas schools require flexibility for localized and personalized operations (Ugarte et al., 2020). There is no point in holding schools accountable if schools cannot practice autonomy in decision-making. Increased external interrogation and interference to impose

control through external accountability while allowing little or no autonomy might undermine creativity and improvement (Charner-Laird & Szczesiul, 2024; Pinheiro et al., 2024). Hence, it is important to understand the experiences and perceptions of school autonomy (Nordholm et al., 2021; Stählkrantz & Rapp, 2022). This study intends to explore how of school heads in private school's experience autonomy and how they transmit it to teachers.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this research are to find out:

1. The perceptions of school heads and teachers regarding school autonomy
2. The extent and nature of school autonomy that heads and teachers perceive themselves to possess in decision-making
3. The challenges faced by school heads in exercising autonomy within institutional constraints

### **Research Questions**

1. How do school heads and teachers perceive school autonomy?
2. What is the extent and nature of school autonomy that heads and teachers perceive themselves to possess in decision-making?
3. What are the challenges faced by school heads in exercising autonomy within institutional constraints?

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researcher felt difficulty during data collection. Therefore, due to the following reasons the study was limited.

- School heads of some renowned private schools did not consent to be interviewed even on conditions of confidentiality.
- The researcher visited two private chain schools and found the school heads unfamiliar with the key terms. Moreover, a lack of language proficiency hindered their ability to respond.

### **Significance**

Exploring the experiences and perceptions of school heads regarding school autonomy can be

potentially significant for different stakeholders, including leaders, policymakers, and administrators. The significance lies in the potential impact it might have on the understandings, perceptions and attitudes towards school autonomy. Policymakers might get an insight into what interventions on school autonomy may be needed to ensure a conducive learning environment. The voices and recorded experiences of the leaders and teachers can inform the strategies of improvement for the policy implementation process. This study reveals how autonomy is enacted and constrained in context of private schools, which is pivotal for leadership training and decentralization reforms.

### Review of Related Literature

This section highlights the theoretical framework of autonomy, the empirical evidence of school leaders and teachers regarding autonomy, and the emerging trends and modern practices of school leadership in the context of autonomy.

### School Autonomy: Theoretical Foundations and Debates

School autonomy refers to the decision-making authority exercised by leaders for carrying out school operations such as curriculum planning, budget allocation, personnel management, classroom instruction, and assessment design (OECD, 2016; Caldwell & Spinks, 2013). School autonomy does not apply to school leaders only but is shared by all actors within the school (Hashim, 2021; Lopez, 2021). The theoretical foundations can serve to explain and dig deeper to understand perceptions and experiences of the school head regarding autonomy.

The **theory of decentralization** is fundamental to understanding school autonomy. This theory moves the decision-making power from external bodies to internal stakeholders (i.e., leaders, teachers and students). As these stakeholders are directly involved in school operations, they can contribute better in decision-making (Faguet, 2023). School-Based Management (SBM) reforms propagated from this theory of school autonomy. Studies claim that SBM improves educational outcomes (Khanal & Guha, 2023).

**Systems theory** presents a clearer understanding of school autonomy. In the light of this theory, school is not an individual system, but marks the nexus of a complex interconnected system (Elomaa et al., 2022). This complex system comprises other schools, local authorities, inspection agencies, and community groups. Therefore, school autonomy is relative rather than absolute. It is dependent on collaborative effort and input of all units (Vanlommel & Van Den Boom-Muilenburg, 2024; Fuller & Kim, 2022). Greany and Higham (2018) argue that autonomy must be “earned and enacted” through collaboration and shared responsibility. To operate complex school systems, leaders must be capable of balancing the school’s internal needs and meeting goals set by the overall system.

**Psychological empowerment theory** makes its way at the micro-level in schools. Following the idea of school autonomy makes leaders and teachers feel intrinsically motivated and ambitious to work for school improvement (Okçu et al., 2024). Research consistently demonstrates that granting autonomy to educators achieves its intended psychological effect only when school leaders actively use empowering practices. The degree to which staff genuinely feel agency is the critical mechanism that links school autonomy to elevated organizational commitment and job satisfaction among educators (Horoub & Zargar, 2022).

### Dimensions of School Autonomy

School autonomy is not a single factor. Different dimensions of autonomy (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013) include administrative, pedagogical autonomy, strategic autonomy, and personnel autonomy.

#### Administrative Autonomy

Administrative autonomy relates to the freedom of decision-making enjoyed by school leaders regarding various operations held in the school. It might include resource allocation, budget distribution, procurement of resources, infrastructural management, or compliance with the external standards. In response to modern

reforms introducing a decentralized system, administrative autonomy is practiced to enhance creativity and flexibility (Gobby & Keddie, 2021).

#### **Pedagogical Autonomy**

Pedagogical autonomy is not restricted to a single individual. It is equally exercised by school leaders and teachers. The school head is authoritative enough to envision the instructional process, manage resources, and design school-wide curricular and extra-curricular activities. Various studies indicate the role of school leadership in promoting pedagogical autonomy. For instance, research highlights that principals' leadership behaviors notably foster teacher autonomy (Akgöz et al., 2024). Furthermore, Lin & Gao (2023) claim that leadership practices are one of the indicators for predicting the degree of pedagogical autonomy that a teacher has to create an innovative classroom environment.

#### **Strategic Autonomy**

Strategic autonomy refers to the collaborative involvement of leaders and teachers to plan a school's long-term goals and improvement plans. School heads with strategic autonomy make decisions on resource allocation, school development initiatives, and institutional operations. Furthermore, they lead the team to incorporate the set strategic goals into operational policies and processes. School leaders perceive and enforce strategic autonomy differently, corresponding to governance models (Nordholm et al., 2021). Strategic decision-making autonomy at the leadership level substantially enhances teacher collaboration, innovation capacity, and adaptability of the school.

#### **Personnel Autonomy**

Personnel autonomy denotes the ability of school principals to manage staffing processes, which may include hiring, evaluation, promotion, and remuneration. High personnel autonomy allows principals to strategically form teams in support of the vision for the school. School autonomy reforms enhance principals' subjective sense of autonomy, and this autonomy is associated with job satisfaction and reduced burnout (Horwood et al., 2022). Moreover, research emphasizes that

principals' autonomy in personnel management plays a vital role in creating leadership capacity and sustaining instructional improvement (Heikkinen, 2021).

#### **Autonomy in Centralized vs Decentralized Systems**

In **centralized education systems**, the autonomy of making decisions in different domains of education belongs to the national education ministries. In this context, the autonomy permitted to school actors is way too limited and highly restrained. Principals are allowed to contribute to school operations only within clearly stated boundaries. They don't have the liberty to fluctuate the curriculum or allocate the budget. Research studies (Mincu, 2023; Kasa & Mhamed, 2023) used the term "controlled autonomy" or "bounded autonomy" to describe this type of liberation exercised within defined limits.

Previous literature explicitly provides the advantages associated with a centralized education system. Firstly, it promotes unity and coherent standards among all schools. The curriculum taught, assessments administered, and learning objectives to be achieved are the same all over the schools ensuring equity. Studies found that centralization can mitigate the inequity in the quality of education that sometimes arises from unchecked autonomy (Keddie et al., 2022). Secondly, a centralized system is budget-friendly in terms of school expenses. Ministries providing training programs, textbooks, and teacher resources to all schools saves cost rather than schools buying resources on their own. Prices can be better negotiated when resources are bought in bulk (Fan & Zhang, 2020). Thirdly, it allows instant and feasible crisis management across all schools. For instance, the mode of instruction shifted to online during COVID-19. National reforms are also easy to implement this way (Mincu, 2023).

Despite the mentioned advantages, the research also records the disadvantages of autonomy in the context of a centralized system. One of the major drawbacks is the lack of contextual flexibility. The centralized curriculum, textbooks and assessments advocate the "one size fits all" postulate that is a

challenge to diverse classrooms with differentiated student needs. Principals and teachers frequently report the imbalance between centralized policies and classroom practice, which limits teachers' adaptability (Bümen & Holmqvist, 2022). Another drawback is that centralized control and compliance pressure suffocate leaders' and teachers' decisions and practices. Professional autonomy of teachers and administrative autonomy of leaders are compromised. They are held accountable for procedures that they are not even welcome to improve (Da Silva, 2021; Kasa & Mhamed, 2023). Furthermore, where centralization assumes equal capacity at the school level, schools that lack resources will be seen as non-compliant when in fact they cannot meet standards unless provided with compensatory funding (Keddie et al., 2022).

**Decentralized educational systems** can bring the decision-making power from one central ministry and hand it over to school boards, head offices or down to the level of the school itself, including its principals and teachers. Decentralization can be actualized using different policies and reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025) and allowing school leaders to take part in various decision-making processes. It empowers teachers to fluctuate or plan lessons and teaching resources according to the students' needs. Setting platforms to include parents' suggestions for improvement is also part of a decentralized educational system.

Among various advantages of decentralized systems, one is that it allows school heads and teachers to adapt and tailor school-level operations and instructional processes according to the social, economic, and cultural needs of students. Secondly, it brings creativity and innovation in the classroom as teachers are allowed to experiment with different teaching techniques. This autonomous teaching and learning environment improve student learning outcomes and academic performance (Nadeem, 2024; Hsieh et al., 2024). Thirdly, it creates a productive and conducive learning environment and a safe school culture where leaders, teachers, and students all have the desired freedom to contribute (Khanal & Guha, 2023).

Commonly recognized drawbacks of decentralization include increased inequalities among different school setups. Renowned private schools drive advantages from the opportunity as they can raise extra funds, attract good teachers, or manage schools more effectively. On the contrary, schools with limited resources may struggle to increase student enrollment or manage school operations effectively. Giving schools autonomy without equitable support or redistributing often only amplifies gaps in student outcomes (Hossain, 2023).

### **Global Models of Autonomy: Comparative Perspectives**

In many European contexts, including the UK and the Netherlands, school-based management emphasizes devolved authority over curriculum, staffing, and budgets. The aim is at increasing responsiveness to local needs but still be bound or linked to performance accountability models (OECD, 2024; Neeleman, 2018). Finland exemplifies a more trust-based model embedded in pedagogical autonomy, minimal standardized testing and high levels of professionalism amongst teachers allowing innovation and equity (Sahlberg, 2015; Ainscow, 2020). In Asia, school models of Singapore and Hong Kong take a more hybrid approach by allowing schools operational autonomy but then placing strict conditions on managing their own standards of the curriculum and assessment mostly to retain some global competitive edge (Koh et al., 2014; Ko et al., 2016).

In comparison to these experiences, the experience of Pakistan is more complicated and constrained. Decentralization efforts in Pakistan took place especially in light of the recent constitutional amendment in 2010. It primarily devolved authority to provincial governments and operational autonomy is still mediated with bureaucratic accountability systems and structures (Gardezi, 2024). Studies of reform (Ahmad et al., 2025; Naz et al., 2023) in Punjab and Sindh have noted attempts by the provincial governments to create school-based management committees to involve communities in decision-making. Limited resources, little real capacity-building

opportunities and a highly entrenched hierarchical approach have stymied any meaningful school autonomy.

**Methodology**

The current study is qualitative phenomenological research to explore the experiences of private school heads regarding school autonomy. Creswell (2013) postulates that qualitative research is a channel to “hear silenced voices” (p. 48). It deals with a verbal description of a phenomenon. “Qualitative research, with its emphasis on context, existence, experience, perspective, meaning, and subjectivity, offers a unique lens through which to explore and interpret the complexities of social phenomena” (Lim, 2024, p.200). The underlying research paradigm is interpretivism. It aligns with phenomenology as it involves subjective interpretations of events for deeper insights (Buriro, 2020) and denies the objective view. The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by observation and interpretation.

**Research Setting**

The current study took place in private schools of the Walton Cantt region in Lahore, Pakistan. This region is well-populated and it is home to renowned private chain schools. These selected schools are all part of a school network. All these

schools serve extensive grade levels from PG to matric. They cater to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Research Sampling**

The population of the study included principals and teachers of all renowned private schools in Lahore. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on the judgment of the researcher who are found suitable for the study (Andrade, 2020). Creswell (2014) suggests being purposeful in identifying participants who might provide insight into your research question. Creswell & Ploth (2018) suggested 3 to 10 participants for an interview in phenomenology. Therefore, the current study employed four private schools. In total, eight school heads and teachers were approached for an interview. Department of Education in University of Management & Technology provided a research approval form to interview participants from different schools. The consent form was signed by the school heads of recommended schools. After data collection, pseudonyms were assigned to participants and they were assigned alphabets. Anonymity of participants ensured the confidentiality of collected data.

**Study Participants’ Demographics**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Designation | Years of Experience |
|-----------|--------|-------------|---------------------|
| P1        | Female | Principal   | 9 years             |
| P2        | Male   | Principal   | 6 years             |
| P3        | Female | Principal   | 7 years             |
| P4        | Female | Principal   | 4 years             |
| T1        | Male   | Teacher     | 3 years             |
| T2        | Female | Teacher     | 7 years             |
| T3        | Female | Teacher     | 9 years             |
| T4        | Female | Teacher     | 1 year 6 months     |

**Research Instrument**

The instrument of the study was a semi-structured interview protocol. Separate interview questions were crafted for school heads and teachers. One-to-one open-ended interviews with school heads and teachers were conducted in school campuses.

Expert review was obtained for interview questions to improve quality of questions in terms of usability, applicability and ease of understanding.

**Data Collection**

Initially, the researcher visited recommended private schools in their locality and asked for permission to include those schools in the study. Consents from the desired number of schools were secured. After collecting consents, the researcher designed a timeline for the interview. Both face-to-face and online interviews were conducted as per the participants' convenience. Online interviews were recorded through Zoom. Interviews with school heads took 20-25 minutes, while teachers were interviewed in 10-15 minutes. Before starting the interview, participants were informed that the interview would be recorded for transcription. Participants found no objection to it. The researcher gave them instructions to share their personal experiences in answer to the questions. Opening questions were asked to communicate a sense of trust and confidence among participants. The researcher remained a good listener and tried their best to create rapport with participants to obtain rich data about the phenomenon. Data collection continued till saturation of data. Participants were thanked cordially for sharing their insights.

### Data Analysis

After data collection, the recorded audios and written notes were transcribed. The data obtained was codified. The data analysis tool used for qualitative research was NVIVO. This tool was employed to derive open codes and themes from the obtained data. Data was read multiple times before final analysis and coding for the sake of developing familiarity. In the first stage, non-repetitive and non-overlapping experiences were highlighted from transcribed audios. Open codes were derived from those highlighted statements, which led to phenomenological reduction. The themes were driven twice, and better ones were adopted to ensure a meaningful conclusion. Each statement and expression was considered with profound care and attention. As Creswell (2013) suggests, to code qualitative data be "open to additional codes emerging during the analysis" (p. 185). Next, the open codes were grouped into themes using NVIVO. Thus, meaningful organization and phenomenological reduction

paved the way for reaching the essence of the study.

### Trustworthiness

In-depth description of data, expert review, and pilot testing of the questions were done to ensure the research's credibility and reliability. Enough quality time was spent with participants during data collection to ensure a better understanding of participants' perspectives. This prolonged engagement improved the credibility of the research. Teachers' perceptions were also recorded to ensure triangulation of the phenomenon. A rich and thick account of research contexts, settings, and participants was provided to ensure transferability. Dependability was maintained by thorough documentation of the research process for authentic replication of the study. Recorded interview audios and external reviewers helped avoid personal bias, leading to the confirmability of research. In short, this is how the trustworthiness of research was confirmed.

### Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)

Following the transcription of semi-structured interviews, step-by-step Reflexive Thematic Analysis was done, as elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2022). This section answers the research questions elaborately in light of participants' responses by identifying themes and sub-themes from the dataset.

### Research Question 1

#### How do school heads and teachers perceive school autonomy?

This theme was derived from the two questions asked from school heads and teachers. This led to following themes and sub-themes.

#### Theme 1: Understanding of Autonomy

The participants shared understanding of school autonomy. Some principals reported bounded autonomy and others clearly mentioned little or no autonomy at all. While sharing insight about school autonomy principal P1 said,

*"School autonomy means having the freedom to make decisions related to academics staff and daily operations without external interference."*

Another principal P2 highlighted bounded autonomy by saying,

*"We are working in a system where you can't say that it is a fully autonomous but while I am not fully autonomous to perform, but nobody stops me at some point in time."*

Principal p3 gave an impression about the extent of school autonomy in her school system and told, *"Over there, autonomy was very clear to every single person actually. So what we had to do that everyone has to stay in their own circle I must say and they had their duties assigned."*

Unlike others, principal P4 denied having autonomy in school.

*"There's autonomy for neither principal, section heads or teachers."*

Teachers reported autonomy in terms of lesson planning and mostly participants were found to be pedagogically autonomous.

*"My head do allow me autonomy in lesson planning and classroom management."* (T1)

*"We are given that autonomy in terms of lesson planning but then again, our autonomy ends where there's a certain pattern that we need to follow."* (T3)

## Research Question 2

**What is the extent and nature of school autonomy that school heads and teachers perceive themselves to possess in decision-making?**

To answer this research question, eight interview questions were asked of school heads and teachers.

## Theme 2: Nature and Extent of School Autonomy

This theme helps to explore the understanding of school heads and teachers regarding school autonomy. The nature and extent of school autonomy vary in different private schools. Here's an overlook on how school heads and teachers experience school autonomy in their respective setups.

### *Administrative Autonomy*

Administrative autonomy refers to the extent of freedom or independence for a school head to operate daily routine procedures related to the

school. The interviews reflected that mostly school heads had satisfactory administrative autonomy. For example, the participant stated that autonomy was maintained in school to a good extent. Additionally, it was claimed,

*"As I have autonomy, I can make decisions related to discipline, routine management, and academic planning."* (P1)

Participant P2 said, *"I have full autonomy"* when asked whether they have autonomy in school operations.

The school head explained that they had a school coordinator who dealt with school operations, and that the head was responsible for educational procedures.

*"If we have to fix anything in the room, we need structures, we need any activity, we need to arrange outside, we had a person assigned to arrange all that stuff."* (P3)

### *Pedagogical Autonomy*

Pedagogical autonomy refers to the autonomy school heads and teachers have in curriculum implementation, planning lessons, or designing teaching methodologies. As per interviews, most of the private schools experienced partial pedagogical autonomy. The syllabus is planned and shared by the head office. Heads are answerable to external authorities who keep track of syllabus completion. For example, a participant said,

*"We follow the Board Curriculum but have some flexibility in teaching methods and classroom activities."* (P1)

Another participant (P2) elaborated on the process of curriculum implementation by stating,

*"Actually, the guidelines are given by APSACS that is the scheme of work (SOW) and syllabus coverage timelines, but which way to do and how to do that is the domain of the school."*

A school head (P3) clearly mentioned,

*"So as far as that curriculum implementation matters, yes, that was completely what I was doing."*

The head of another private school elaborated on the same procedure as she said,

*"We have autonomy at the class level in lesson planning or planning class activities. Textbooks and syllabus completion plan come from the head office." (P4)*

The semi-structured interviews of teachers revealed that a few areas of school operations allowed higher pedagogical autonomy to teachers than others. The domains reported with high autonomy include lesson planning and classroom management. Teachers were allowed to plan lessons independently and enjoy the support of school heads in classroom management. For example, participants (T1), (T2), and (T3) shared with great certainty that,

*"Definitely, my head does allow me autonomy in lesson planning and classroom management. There is no hard and fast rule that we have to follow while designing the lesson plans."*

*"The teachers are always the ones who are planning the lesson, modifying it according to the needs of our classroom."*

*"We are given autonomy in terms of lesson planning, but then again, our autonomy ends where there's a certain pattern that we need to follow."*

There are domains of school operations where teachers face restricted autonomy in order to meet external standards. These domains include planning lesson activities and lesson pacing. Teachers wanted more control in managing the pace of lessons. For example, when participants were asked about the area of school operation in which they feel unwelcome and need more autonomy, participants reported,

*"I think teachers should be allowed to adjust the pace of the curriculum so that more students can grasp the concept quickly and clearly because teachers are directly involved in the students learning process."*

Participants (T3) and (T4) mentioned a lack of autonomy in activity planning,

*"If our coordinator doesn't like the activity, we might have to change that as well." (T3)*

*"Even when an activity is directly related to my lesson, prior approval from the coordinator or principal is mandatory for that. So, without permission, the activities cannot be conducted in class by the teachers." (T4)*

Just as school head P4 denied the existence of autonomy in their school, the teacher T4 of the same school seconded participant P4.

*"We must strictly adhere to the approved formats, the guidelines and instructional policies. We are bound to them. So, classroom management and teaching strategies are also regulated by the authorities." (T4)*

### ***Financial Autonomy***

Financial autonomy refers to the autonomy in budget allocation and resource management. Strict external audits take place in schools, mostly keeping budget management central. Resource demand is sent by the school heads to the head offices and the budget is approved by external authorities as per need. The school heads were found to play an advisory role in budget allocation. For example,

*"Well budget decisions are mainly taken by the management and we can request materials based on school needs." (P1)*

*"I can ask for the required things. I am asked to list down details and then the requirements and needs are fulfilled." (P4)*

Another participant mentioned prioritizing things based on need as he said,

*"Actually, there is no problem at all but adjustments have to be made because the funds have to be released by the head office." (P2)*

When adjustments are needed, things are sorted out through consultation as he said,

*"I do sit with the section heads and ask them, okay, let's only list the things, only stationery items, which are necessary, luxury may not be entertained." (P2)*

As per responses of P2 it is clear that financial autonomy is fully there as he said, *"The decision is mine when I spend it"* but along with that the head experiences strict external accountability as quoted,

*"So, our audit is a very strict mechanism through which we have to pass every 6 months."*

### ***Personnel Autonomy***

School heads were asked about their authority in hiring or dismissing faculty members. The responses showed limited hiring and dismissal powers and a need for approvals in key decisions. For example, participants shared their experiences as follows,

*“Hiring and dismissals are handled again by the management but according to my recommendations.” (P1)*

*“Hiring cannot be done without consultation. The final decision is made by the head office.” (P4)*

Similarly, P2 shared that he has the power to fire the teachers but only recommends hiring. As he explained,

*“When I send it that it has to be terminated, they have to agree with me, if they don't agree, they post him/her or the staff out.”*

For hiring staff he said,

*“I do have autonomy to propose or recommend a teacher but final selection, I have a role in the final selection, but I am not the decision maker.”*

### Research Question 3

#### What are the challenges faced by school heads and teachers in exercising autonomy within institutional constraints?

##### Theme 3: Challenges and Tensions

While school heads are allowed decision making in different school operations, their decisions are shaped by existing institutional policies and procedures. Therefore, school heads and teachers face emotional, psychological, professional and instructional challenges while implementing autonomous practices in everyday school operations.

##### Professional Challenges

When school heads were asked if they faced challenges in exercising autonomy, most of them related their professional challenges to external organizational policies. For example, participants elaborated on the challenges they face as

*“The main challenge in balancing both accountability and autonomy is managing expectations from management and parents while keeping space for creativity in school operations.”*

(P1)

However, a participant recounted a policy of the school according to which only native English speakers who have an American passport can teach English. Despite being against the policy but still lacked the power to confront the policy. The example that perfectly explains the professional

challenges heads and teachers face in the workplace.

But what we did not agree on was that if a person cannot speak well, and he just got the passport because of his good luck or some good days he had in his life, it doesn't mean that we can ruin the student's career on that. (P3)

Another school head shared the major professional challenge, i.e., the compliance-based role adjustment of the teachers, while the salary is quite inadequate.

*“Hiring a teacher on a meager salary and then making them adjust as per the external directors' requirements and policies is quite a challenging task.”(P4)*

##### Emotional Challenges

Some school heads reported emotional constraint faced while exercising autonomy. Being held accountable caused disturbance for some participants. School heads experienced elevated expectations from external authorities and emotional stress in decision-making. Participants shared experiences of elevated expectations as

*“Occasionally, balancing school policies with the management's expectations can be challenging. (P1)*

*“If I go really honest, and not use a sugar-coated word, I would be saying, yeah, they hold you accountable for more. It's not more help actually.”(P3)*

Similarly, the participant shared an incident when she was not allowed to plan the teachers' day celebration in her school. She expressed her emotions associated with the strict actions of external authorities as she said,

*“It was really upsetting for me as I wanted an appreciation for my teachers. They should have been allowed to enjoy at least one day... after all, they get scolded every other day.”(P4)*

##### Value-based Conflicts

Participants reported incidents when participants faced conflict between personal judgment and imposed rules. A participant shared it as,

*“I must say that the contrast which I have seen there, that it shouldn't be happening. We can say it's a clash with the moral values as well.”(P3)*

Another school head stated,

*“Tensions are there all the time. Many times, situations arise when external accountability requirements clash with my own priorities. Still, what can we do?”(P4)*

## Instructional Challenges

Teachers reported incidents where they experienced a limit to creativity in teaching. They are supposed to meet the inspection criteria and cannot do anything beyond policies. For example, teacher T1 shared a situation where she bounds herself to follow the planner to meet the external requirement.

*“I was being evaluated in class, and I deliberately avoided an activity in class because I forgot to mention it in my planner. (T1)*

The teacher further reported,

*I found it necessary for the topic but again I didn't because I had to stick to the planner so that the evaluator wouldn't question my teaching methodology.”(T1)*

Another teacher put forward the same point as

*“Activities that are not directly linked to inspection criteria are often avoided even when they are educationally beneficial for the students.” (T4)*

## Findings

The findings of the study are summarized according to the research questions as follows:

The participants recognize autonomy as a freedom of decision-making in different domains of school operations without external interference. The extent of autonomy is different across schools and even across different domains within the same school. School heads are allowed administrative autonomy to a good extent. Pedagogical autonomy is partially practiced in schools where heads and teachers are allowed a certain level of flexibility in syllabus completion, lesson planning, teaching methodology and classroom management while restrictions are experienced in lesson pacing, activity planning and curriculum design due to external policies and plans. Financial and personnel autonomy are recognized as the most limited and externally controlled areas. Budget and resource allocation decisions are made by external authorities. School heads play an advisory role as they put up the resource demands, while the provision of funds and resources is subject to

approval from authorities. A strict audit is done externally to keep track of expenditure practices. School heads can recommend hiring and dismissals, but the final decision is made by the authorities. Conclusively, key decisions are under external control while school heads and teachers experience autonomy with defined boundaries. The pedagogical creativity is undermined due to compromised autonomy. Participants experiences indicate the emotional, professional, instructional and value-based conflicts they face while exercising autonomy in schools.

## Discussions

Participants in current research perceive autonomy as the freedom of decision-making, which is consistent with the definition of autonomy throughout the literature. In this study, bounded autonomy was reported, which aligns with previous research as well. Autonomy operates within the boundaries set by external systems such as performance inspections and control from external bodies (Sivesind & Karseth, 2022). While the literature review provides a general view of autonomy (pedagogical, administrative, financial, and personnel), the findings supply a specific and operational lens to all types of autonomy. Principals and teachers in the current study shared the tension they experience due to the challenge of managing external requirements. Principals and teachers frequently report the imbalance between centralized policies and classroom practice, which limits teachers' adaptability (Bümen & Holmqvist, 2022). Existing literature also reinforces the most centralized control over budgetary roles and personnel decisions.

## Conclusions

Autonomy for school heads and teachers is bounded and conditional, depending on the nature of autonomy. The school heads and teachers are allowed more autonomy in administrative and pedagogical school operations than in financial and personnel autonomy. School heads are fully autonomous in managing daily school operations. Resource demand is sent by the school heads to the head offices and the budget is approved by external authorities as per need.

School heads have limited hiring and dismissal powers and a need for approvals in key decisions is mandatory. School heads experience emotional, psychological and professional challenges due to the requirements of external authorities while practicing autonomy. Strategic leadership practices are essential to preserve autonomy while meeting external requirements.

### Recommendations

1. The authorities should take suggestions and inputs in consultation meetings with school heads and teachers before making key decisions.
2. Private chain schools should move towards decentralization as the socioeconomic context of each school changes with locality.
3. School management should involve school heads and teachers in curriculum implementation and resource management.
4. Strict inspection criteria should be excised to give way to flexible, innovative teaching and meaningful learning.
5. Transparent policies should be designed to explicitly define the extents of autonomy for school heads and teachers to seek psychological and professional stability.
6. Future researchers may conduct a comparative analysis of autonomy in public and private schools to explore how governance structure influences autonomy.

### References

- Ahmad, Z., Shah, I., Alam, A., & Khan, H. (2025). Dynamics of education policy formulation after the 18th amendment in Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *journal.unismuh.ac.id*. <https://doi.org/10.26618/705t2662>
- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Andrade, C. (2020). The inconvenient truth about convenience and purposive samples. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 43(1), 86-88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620977000>
- Bümen, N. T., & Holmqvist, M. (2022). Teachers' sense-making and adapting of the national curriculum: a multiple case study in Turkish and Swedish contexts. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(6), 832-851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2022.2121178>
- Buriro, A., Ednut, N., & Khatoon, Z. (2020). Philosophical underpinning and phenomenology approach in social science research. *Asia-Pacific Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia*, 38, 237-254.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Gardezi, S. (2024). The development and status of self-evaluation as a component of school inspection and quality assurance: a comparison across four countries. *Heliyon*, 10(20), e39321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e39321>
- Ko, J., Cheng, Y. C., & Lee, T. T. H. (2016). The development of school autonomy and accountability in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(7), 1207-1230. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-10-2015-0145>
- Koh, E., Ponnusamy, L. D., Tan, L. S., Lee, S., & Ramos, M. E. (2014). A Singapore Case Study of Curriculum Innovation in the Twenty-First Century: Demands, Tensions and deliberations. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23(4), 851-860. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-014-0216-z>
- Lim, W. M. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>

- Naz, L., Qureshi, A. A., & Sohail, F. (2023). Pre- and post-assessment of School Management Committees: A case study of Sindh. *Business Review*, 18(1), 48–70. <https://doi.org/10.54784/1990-6587.1497>
- Neeleman, A. (2018). The scope of school autonomy in practice: An empirically based classification of school interventions. *Journal of Educational Change*, 20(1), 31–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-018-9332-5>
- Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press. [https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Finnish\\_Lessons.html?id=py7r-7Lz-w4C&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Finnish_Lessons.html?id=py7r-7Lz-w4C&redir_esc=y)
- Akgöz, E. E., Şahin, F., & Erdoğan, O. (2024). The mediator role of school climate in the relationship between instructional leadership behaviors of school principals and teacher autonomy. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 38(4), 1142–1159. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-07-2023-0323>
- Amani, N. U. (2025). Balancing accountability and autonomy in education. *Eurasian Experiment Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 57–63. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390696047>
- Caldwell, B. J., & Spinks, J. M. (2013). The Self-Transforming School. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203387986>
- Da Silva, A. L. L. (2021). Comparing teacher autonomy in different models of educational governance. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 8(2), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1965372>
- Elomaa, M., Eskelä-Haapanen, S., Pakarinen, E., Halttunen, L., & Lerkkanen, M. (2022). Elementary school principals' work from the ecological systems perspective: Evidence from Finland. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(5), 1231–1251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221125999>
- Faguet, J. P. (2023). Understanding decentralization: Theory, evidence, and practice. In: Faguet, J. P. & Pal, S. (eds) *Decentralised Governance: Crafting Effective Democracies Around the World*, London: LSE Press, pp. 21–48. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress>
- Fan, G., & Zhang, L. (2020). Education governance and school autonomy: The progressive reform of k–12 school in China. In: Fan, G. & Popkewitz, T.S. (eds) *Handbook of Education Policy Studies*. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8343-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8343-4_3)
- Fuller, B., & Kim, H. (2022). Systems thinking to transform schools: Identifying levers that lift educational quality. Policy Brief. *Center for Universal Education at The Brookings Institution*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626323.pdf>
- Greany, T., & Higham, R. (2018). Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: Analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools. UCL Institute of Education Press: London, UK.
- Hashim, A. K., Torres, C., & Kumar, J. M. (2021). Is more autonomy better? How school actors perceive school autonomy and effectiveness in context. *Journal of Educational Change*, 24(2), 183–212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09439-x>

- Heikkinen, H. L. T., Wilkinson, J., & Bristol, L. (2021). Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy: school principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica. *Journal of Educational Administration & History*, 53(3-4), 198-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1849060>
- Horwood, M., Parker, P. D., Marsh, H. W., Guo, J., & Dicke, T. (2022). School autonomy policies lead to increases in principal autonomy and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 115, 102048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102048>
- Hossain, M. (2023). The linkage between school autonomy and inequality in achievement in 69 countries: does development level matter? *The Journal of Development Studies*, 59(10), 1491-1507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2023.2232916>
- Hsieh, C., Song, Y., & Li, H. (2024). Analyzing the relationship between distributed leadership and instructional quality in Taiwan: The mediating roles of teacher autonomy and teacher innovation. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241231421>
- Kameshwara, K. K., Shields, R., & Sandoval-Hernandez, A. (2023). Decentralization in school management and student achievement: Evidence from India. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 60(1), 67-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2023.2273800>
- Kasa, R., & Mhamed, A. S. (2023). Controlled autonomy: Experiences of principals under two school funding regimes in Kazakhstan. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 103, 102875. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102875>
- Keddie, A., MacDonald, K., Blackmore, J., Boyask, R., Fitzgerald, S., Gavin, M., Heffernan, A., Hursh, D., McGrath-Champ, S., Møller, J., O'Neill, J., Parding, K., Salokangas, M., Skerritt, C., Stacey, M., Thomson, P., Wilkins, A., Wilson, R., Wylie, C., & Yoon, E. (2022). What needs to happen for school autonomy to be mobilised to create more equitable public schools and systems of education? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(5), 1571-1597. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00573-w>
- Khanal, S., & Guha, P. (2023). Exploring the relationship between school-based management and school climate using PISA data. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 24(4), 617-631. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-023-09846-0>
- Khanal, S., & Guha, P. (2023). Exploring the relationship between school-based management and school climate using PISA data. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 24(4), 617-631. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-023-09846-0>
- Kumar, P. (2025, May 29). *The Changing Role of School Leaders: Adapting to Modern Educational Needs*. Teachers Institute. <https://teachers.institute/head-teachers-as-school-leaders/changing-role-school-leaders/>
- Kumar, P. (2025, May 29). *The Changing Role of School Leaders: Adapting to Modern Educational Needs*. Teachers Institute. <https://teachers.institute/head-teachers-as-school-leaders/changing-role-school-leaders/>

- Lin, Q., & Gao, X. (2023). Exploring the predictors of teachers' teaching autonomy: A three-level international study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *135*, 104338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104338>
- López, N., & Linares, Á. (2021). School autonomy at the service of educational success for all. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *29*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.14507/EPAA.29.5366>
- Mincu, M. (2023). Governance mechanisms, school principals and the challenge of personalized education in contexts. *Prospects*, *54*(1), 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-023-09663-8>
- Nadeem, M. (2024). Distributed leadership in educational contexts: A catalyst for school improvement. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *9*, 100835. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100835>
- Niesche, R., Eacott, S., Keddie, A., Gobby, B., MacDonald, K., Wilkinson, J., & Blackmore, J. (2021). Principals' perceptions of school autonomy and educational leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *51*(6), 1260–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211034174>
- Nordholm, D., Arnqvist, A., & Nihlfors, E. (2021). Sense-making of autonomy and control: Comparing school leaders in public and independent schools in a Swedish case. *Journal of Educational Change*, *23*(4), 497–519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09429-z>
- Okçu, V., Cemaloğlu, N., & Ay, İ. (2024). The effect of school principals' empowering leadership behaviors on well-being at work: The mediating role of organizational ostracism. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, *34*(2), 777–791. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-024-00895-6>
- Stählkrantz, K., & Rapp, S. (2022). Leading for higher grades—balancing school leadership on the fine line between accountability and professional autonomy. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2098381>
- Steiner-Khamsi, G., Appius, S., & Nägeli, A. (2025). Comparing two transfer spaces over time and against a global script: the case of school-autonomy-with-accountability. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2024.2394594>
- Watkins, S., Anthony, A. B., & Beard, K. S. (2020). Principals' sensemaking of leading under accountability and innovation policies, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *20*(3), 522–542. DOI: 10.1080/15700763.2020.1734207