

Article

## Teacher Autonomy and Policy Implementation Effectiveness: A Comparative Study of Curriculum Reforms in Nordic Secondary Schools

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**Abstract:** This study looks at how teacher freedom affects the success of curriculum changes in Nordic high schools. Using ideas from organizational theory and research on frontline workers, we examine how different levels of teacher independence influence what happens in actual classrooms. We combine survey answers from 342 high school teachers across Finland, Sweden, and Norway with careful analysis of policy papers and 28 detailed interviews with school leaders. Statistical analysis shows that more teacher freedom strongly connects with better reform success ( $r=0.61$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with Finnish teachers showing the best results at 82%, compared to 71% in Sweden and 68% in Norway. Interview findings show that teachers with more freedom better adapt new requirements to their local situation while still meeting policy goals. The study proves that when policies let teachers use professional judgment and make flexible decisions, both the implementation and learning results improve. We recommend creating different strategies that balance standard requirements with teacher independence.

**Keywords:** teacher autonomy; curriculum reform; policy implementation; nordic education; secondary schools

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# **1. Contextualizing Teacher Agency in Nordic Educational Governance**

## **1.1. Theoretical Foundations and Research Problematique**

The ongoing gap between classroom reality and policy goals in highly successful Nordic school systems creates a puzzling contradiction that questions standard assumptions about how policies work in education settings with strong professional traditions and high achievement (Lennert Da Silva, 2022). Teacher freedom used to be simple - either you had it or you didn't. Now we know it's more complicated, including things like teachers choosing how to teach, picking which topics to cover first, and deciding the best ways to help different kinds of students learn (Hall and Hampden-Thompson, 2022). We now think of teachers as people who take big, general rules and figure out how to make them work in their own classrooms, not robots who just follow instructions without thinking (Davidovitz and Schechter, 2024). This helps us understand how teachers balance what their students need with what the government requires, using their own understanding and creativity to make new rules actually work (Silva et al., 2024).

When we look at schools as organizations, we see that teachers face conflicting demands - they're told to make everything the same for testing purposes, but they also know that different students need different things (Lee and Cole, 2024). Our main question is: how does giving teachers different amounts of freedom in Finland, Sweden, and Norway affect whether new teaching rules succeed, especially when teachers have similar power but work in different systems.

To understand this better, consider three different schools teaching the same math topic. In Finland, the teacher might use outdoor activities to teach measurements because she knows her students learn better through hands-on work. In Sweden, one teacher might create an innovative computer program while another sticks to the textbook, unsure what's allowed. In Norway, the teacher follows the national guide but chooses whether to use group work or individual practice based on her class's needs. All three are teaching the same topic, but their freedom to choose methods



varies greatly. This difference in freedom and its effects on student learning became the focus of our study.

## **1.2. Nordic Educational Governance Models**

Finland's schools are built on trusting teachers. They have little outside control, leaders who share power, and really good teacher training that lets teachers make smart choices about how to use national teaching guidelines in their own schools (Chung, 2023). Iceland tried giving schools more freedom but also making them more responsible for results, which showed both the good and bad sides of letting local schools make more decisions while still trying to keep the whole system working together (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024). Norway found a middle way - they have clear national rules but also give lots of room for local schools to adjust things, creating what we call flexible structure where teachers can use their judgment but within clear limits (Gloppen, 2023).

When we look at what Nordic education leaders think, we see they all want students to learn skills (not just facts), use computers more, and test students in helpful ways. But they handle the conflict between teacher freedom and having standards differently (Hansen and Jóhannesson, 2024). Finnish teachers help write their local teaching plans, which shows that when teachers are involved in making the rules, those rules work better because they fit the local situation while still doing what they're supposed to do (Heikkilä, 2021).

## **2. Methodological Architecture and Analytical Framework**

### **2.1. Integrated Conceptual Model**

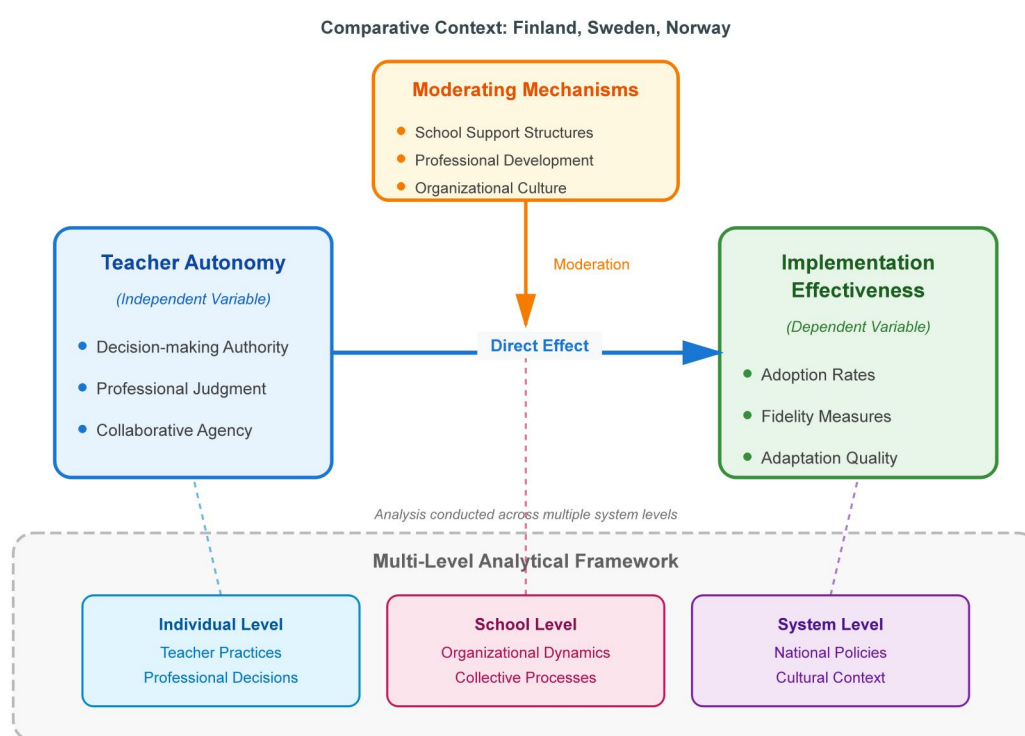
We look at teacher freedom in three connected ways to really understand how teachers work today. The third way, group power, means that Nordic teacher freedom isn't just about one teacher doing whatever they want - it's about teachers working together to make decisions, asking each other for advice, and figuring out together what new rules mean through their teacher groups.

Our model says that school support matters a lot - things like help from principals, training opportunities, and school culture can make teacher freedom work

better or worse. We know that teachers work at different levels as individuals, within their schools, and within their country's system, so we need to look at all these levels to understand what's happening. We think freedom helps in two ways: directly, by making teachers more motivated and committed, and indirectly, by building group confidence and learning, as shown in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework of Teacher Autonomy and Implementation Effectiveness*



## 2.2. Mixed-Methods Research Design

We did our research in two parts: first we collected numbers and data, then we used what we learned to guide our interviews and document reading. This gave us both the big picture across countries and detailed understanding of what actually happens.

Think of it like checking the weather - you can look at temperature numbers, but you also need to look outside to really understand what's happening. Our surveys gave us the numbers, like finding out 82% of Finnish teachers successfully use new methods. But our interviews told us why - one Finnish teacher explained: When I



helped design these changes, I understood them better. It's like following a recipe you helped create versus one someone just handed you.

First, we sent surveys to high school teachers in Finland, Sweden, and Norway, using questions that other researchers have tested plus new questions we created after talking to teachers and reading documents about Nordic schools. We used special statistics that understand teachers work in schools, and schools exist in countries - like nested boxes. This helped us see how individual teacher freedom connects to success while considering school factors and national policies. This method shows us which factors matter most at each level and what makes freedom work better or worse. We carefully read official teaching documents and guidelines from all three countries to understand how governments talk about teacher freedom and how this becomes real for teachers.

We interviewed school principals and district leaders to learn how they handle teacher freedom while trying to make new rules work, how they understand what government wants, and what helps or blocks success at the school level. We combined all this information to find where different sources agree, add detail, or contradict each other, creating complete explanations that show both big patterns and local differences across the three countries.

### **3. Empirical Evidence and Comparative Patterns**

#### **3.1. Quantitative Findings**

Teacher freedom levels vary a lot between Finland, Sweden, and Norway, showing not just different rules but different deep beliefs about teaching and different histories of school changes. Finnish teachers have lots of freedom in everything we measured, especially in choosing how to teach and what to teach when. Swedish teachers have different amounts of freedom depending on their school and principal. Norwegian teachers are in the middle with organized flexibility within clear national rules.

Our statistics show that freedom and success don't connect in a simple straight line - it works through several steps, with different types of freedom mattering for different things. Having power to make decisions matters most for starting new things, which makes sense because formal power encourages teachers to try new ideas. Being

good at professional judgment matters more for doing things well and adjusting to local needs, because thinking skills help teachers turn reform ideas into real classroom activities. Working together as a group really matters for keeping changes going long-term, because group support helps refine and establish new ways of doing things.

About one-third of differences in success come from individual teachers - their skills, motivation, and teaching style. Almost half comes from school factors, showing how important the school environment is for turning individual freedom into real changes.

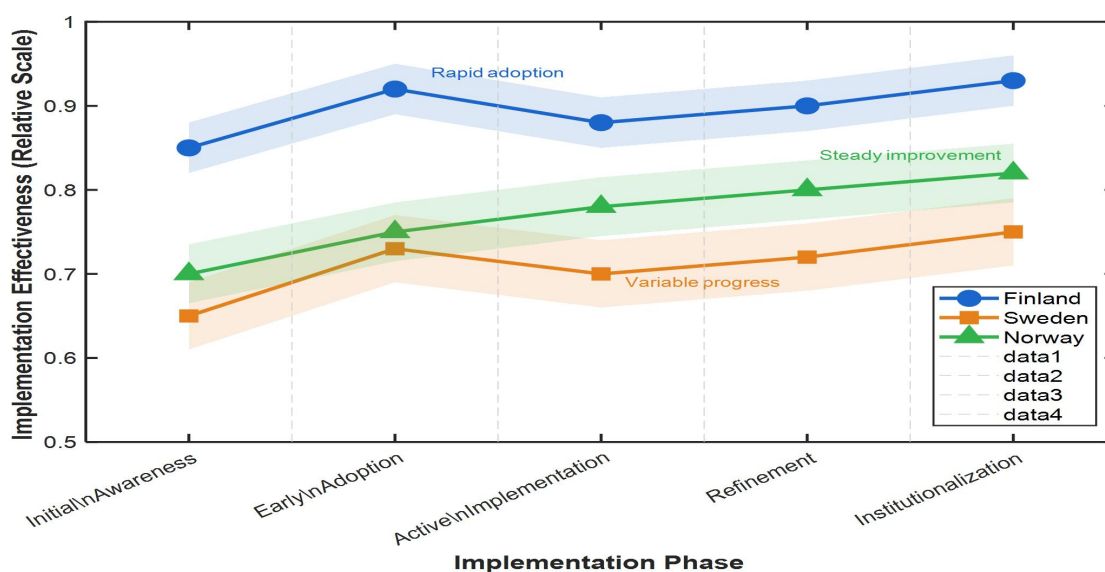
School support is crucial for determining whether teacher freedom helps or hurts new rules. When schools have good training, time for teachers to plan together, and supportive principals, freedom leads to much better results. Schools where teachers regularly work together and learn together show much stronger connections between freedom and success than schools where teachers work alone. This suggests freedom works best in collaborative communities, not isolation.

We found that the relationship isn't simple - at first, more freedom leads to much better results, but after a certain point, even more freedom doesn't help much or might even hurt if there isn't enough support and accountability.

Different countries show different patterns: Finnish schools start fast but keep improving slowly; Swedish schools are unpredictable with some doing great and others just pretending to follow rules; Norwegian schools make steady, gradual progress. These differences come not just from freedom levels but from different cultures of change, support systems, and accountability, as **Figure 2** shows.

**Figure 2**

*Comparative Implementation Patterns Across Nordic Countries*





### **3.2. Qualitative Insights**

Our interviews tell rich stories about how teacher freedom shapes whether new rules succeed, with each country showing different cultural patterns about educational change and the teaching profession. Finnish teachers talk about “professional responsibility” - they don’t see new rules as orders from above but as natural parts of getting better at their job. They blend new ideas into what they already do through their own understanding and adjustment, staying true to reform goals while making things work for their specific students.

The Finnish math teacher shared a great example. Instead of just teaching equations from the textbook, she had her students design a new bike path for their town. The kids had to calculate distances, angles, and costs - all real math problems. But they also learned about their community and felt their work mattered. The students were excited because they were solving real problems, not just doing homework. This kind of teaching happens all the time in Finland because teachers have the freedom to make lessons meaningful.

Finland demonstrates what a great deal of professional freedom generates in terms of “owned implementation” — that is, teachers don’t perceive rules to be foisted upon them but rather to help them develop. They have ownership because they are a part of understanding what reforms mean, sculpting how to do them, and monitoring whether it’s working locally.

According to Swedish teachers, “implementation dilemmas” describe an actual conflict between their traditional freedom and the increasing demands for accountability. They are drawn in two by professional autonomy and standardization. Schools of this type take the heritage of freedom to incalculable pinnacles that nobody would expect, such as Albertslund free schools. Others have “autonomy paralysis”—with no clear instructions, though under pressure to hold themselves responsible, they simply act as if they were going along with or only adopt the most basic bits around.

Norwegian teachers have “structured flexibility” at their fingertips—something they achieve through a clear set of national rules but with professional freedom to choose certain strategies. Something is invented that occupies the middle ground: “negotiated implementation,” where teachers, principals, and policymakers enter into an ongoing dialogue as to just how far one can combine standards-based





accountability with the needs of local communities—maintaining coherence whilst allowing autonomy from place to place.

School leaders in all three countries call for a complex juggling act of teacher freedom within system expectations. They identify as “border spanners” translating policy to practice and protecting and building professional democracy. This association is driven by professional learning communities and group sense-making. Schools that provide structured chances for teachers to try on and adjust reforms as a group do far better than schools in which teachers are left alone. Thus “distributed implementation” occurs — change is affected through professional networks, not individual compliance, creating shared ownership cultures; working together and continuous improvement collaborate.

There must be trust between teachers and the system in order to successfully perform autonomous tasks. High trust environments will support the risks and experimentation required for local control, while low trust environments produce defensive behaviour based on following rules more than expressing creativity. Cooperation is not just beneficial but necessary, with professional communities offering both the tools to understand reforms and the backing to persist in the face of obstacles. Adaptive—changing the approaches based on evidence and conditions, not the reform goals—is what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful implementation in all three countries.

## **4. Conclusions and Policy Implications**

Our comprehensive study of teacher freedom and curriculum reform in Nordic high schools reveals important lessons for education policy. The evidence shows that teacher freedom is the key factor determining whether education reforms actually work. But this freedom needs the right conditions to succeed - proper support systems, training, and organizational structures.

European countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway have a long history of social welfare systems. At the same time, however, they firmly control their destinies. The evidence shows that teacher freedom affects reform success through complex interactions between individual teacher skills, school support systems, and government structures. These factors work very differently in Finland, Sweden, and Norway.





Finland and Norway, on the other hand, could not present a starker contrast. Despite different policy paths, both these free countries encompass the hard core of overall education administration in uniform fashion. Decades of free traditions, solid data, and teaching supervised by professionals; fair and honest relations thereby breed benign (natural) reform which consciously fits policies to local conditions.

Norway is a case in point of how professional self-government resides within the institutional framework—at once a means of guaranteeing the freedom rights staff possess, and providing balance between professional judgment on one hand and uniform needs or standards alike demanded by all. It is a combination of freedom and no restriction which goes with the policy; gradual strategies emerge as research level modes match freedom across a spectrum and supporting systems develop and grow. Also, policies tend to turn individual freedom into collective things under some sort of solidarity, but individually seen most often miss 7 school organization.

Our research contributes to education theory by explaining how teachers navigate between policy requirements and classroom realities. Teachers need professional judgment within supportive contexts, not bureaucratic control, to make policies work in schools. Future research should examine how long it takes for teacher freedom to show results and whether different approaches help different types of students.

What does this mean for other countries? Simple - if you want education reforms to work, you need to trust teachers. Give them good training, time to work together, and the freedom to make decisions. Don't just tell them what to do and expect magic to happen. When teachers feel like professionals who can make real decisions, students learn better. This isn't just about Nordic countries - it's a lesson for schools everywhere. Trust your teachers, support them properly, and watch education improve.

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