



## **Semantic Representation of Teacher Autonomy: A Grounded Theory Study**

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### **ARTICLE INFO**

Article history:

### **Received:**

05/04/2022

### **Accepted:**

03/11/2022

Available  
online:

Autumn 2022

### **Keyword:**

Autonomy,  
Teachers,  
Model,  
Grounded  
Theory

### **Abstract**

The present study aimed to represent the autonomy of teachers adopting the grounded theory semantically. The research approach of this study was qualitative, and the theory method was grounded theory. The statistical population included all primary school teachers and principals in Lorestan, Iran. To collect qualitative data, interviews were conducted with 45 experienced teachers, school principals, specialists, and professors. In this study, the purposive sampling method was used for participant selection. The sampling method was purposefully continued until the researcher reached theoretical saturation. The basic indicators of the model of autonomy of schoolteachers were identified using a review of the research background and content analysis of the interviews. Next, the three stages of axial coding, selective coding, and main category resulted in six main categories: axial Phenomenon, Causal Conditions, Background Conditions, Interfering Conditions, Strategic Conditions, and Consequences Conditions. Teachers' Autonomy Model was developed, including 23 axial codes in the form of six selective codes for the six dimensions of axial Phenomenon, causal conditions (with four axial codes), background conditions (with two axial codes), interfering factors (with two axial codes), strategy (with seven axial codes), and consequences (with four axial codes). The extracted qualitative model can be used in policy-making and professional autonomy planning, especially in the professional development of teachers.

Gallehdari, F., Hoseynpour, S., & Hasani, R. (2022). Semantic Representation of Teacher Autonomy: A Grounded Theory Study, *Journal of School Administration*, 10(3), 26-51.

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## Introduction

Teachers are the most essential component of any education system, and the effectiveness of education depends on the effectiveness of teachers in that education system (Coombe, 2020). Teachers' autonomy promotes efficiency, satisfaction, commitment, creativity and innovation, learning, job involvement, professional development, performance improvement, and so on. Job autonomy leads to flexibility and organizational creativity (Tahmasbzadeh Sheikhlari, Azimpour, & Sheikhi, 2019); as a result, it is no surprise that many studies have examined the characteristics of successful teachers, such as teacher autonomy in classrooms and educational settings. Derakhshan, Coombe, Arab Mofrad, and Taghizadeh (2020) defined teacher autonomy as the ability to develop effective skills, knowledge, and attitudes and interact with colleagues. Being able to choose the teaching content themselves, the autonomous teacher feels more motivated, which in turn brings a feeling of joy and satisfaction to the teacher. Moreover, this makes them grow and leads to more job efficiency (Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016). Although autonomy has been widely welcomed by teachers, and they need to be more independent in choosing how to present the curriculum, achieving autonomy seems challenging due to teachers' large workload and perceived responsibilities (Hoggs & Lewes, 2020).

Teachers are among the most critical professionals for the future of society, and the education system will not be efficient without them (Selamat, Samsu & Kamalu, 2013). Teachers' autonomy is one of the most significant aspects of their professional behavior. Teachers are not merely dependent on policymakers,

researchers, and managers. As a professional group, they can consider themselves as the main actors in the light of cooperation and reflection (Stenhouse, 1988). Teachers' success depends on their autonomy because autonomous teachers feel responsible for their teaching. In other words, successful teachers are, more often than not autonomous teachers. In this regard, McGrath offers a more comprehensive explanation of teacher autonomy. He views teacher autonomy as a) self-directed professional development and b) freedom of control by colleagues. He distinguishes these two dimensions and emphasizes that the former pays more attention to the psychological point of view, while the latter dimension deals more with the political aspect. Therefore, teacher autonomy can be described as "the capacity, freedom, or responsibility to choose how to teach" (Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016). Autonomous teachers use more positive evaluation methods in teaching and learning (Verataj, Abdullah, & Ismail, 2015).

There are various views on motivation and autonomy. In this regard, one such view is the theory of self-determination, according to which intrinsic motivation is the innate tendency to pursue desires, use abilities, and seek out and meet optimal challenges (Desi & Ryan, 2012). Consequently, the autonomy of school teachers is one of the main reforms in education, which affects school-based management, situation-based decision-making and budgeting, school self-management, local school management, improving the quality of schools, changing educational conditions, curriculum changes, promoting student learning, and educational performance

(Cheng et al., 2016). Using within- and between-country comparisons, the comprehensive surveys of the Gratan Institute (2013) showed a positive relationship between autonomy of school principals and teachers and educational performance.

Increasing teachers' autonomy, especially in terms of their professional development goals, will improve teachers' job satisfaction and their intention to stay in the teaching profession (Worth & Van Den Brande, 2020). Supporting job autonomy means that managers, staff, and social groups create an atmosphere of autonomy to encourage participation in independent roles (Rood, 2013). Hence, in formulating human resources strategies, the workforce should be given autonomy to achieve commitment, development, innovation, and organizational learning. In addition, knowledge-sharing behaviors occur by supporting employee autonomy (personal satisfaction and organizational interests) in the workplace (Wang & Hu, 2016).

Different countries have made great efforts to reform their curricula. For example, Wales's current curriculum reform has provided teachers with more freedom to develop teaching approaches that meet the needs of their students. Moreover, Donaldson (2015), in the Successful Future Report recommends that teachers be more independent when choosing how to present the curriculum. Although teachers have widely recognized autonomy, it is difficult to achieve true autonomy due to their high workload and perceived responsibilities (Hughes & Lewis, 2020). Therefore, in today's world, the importance of education is clear to anyone, and the development of a country in the first stage depends on its education system.

As such, teachers play a vital role in a successful education system (Selamat et al., 2013). Independent teachers are more motivated and enjoy their job when they can choose their teaching methods and strategies. Teachers' satisfaction with their profession leads them to work harder, be more efficient, and not suffer extreme fatigue and exhaustion.

Tahmasbzadeh, Sheikhlari, et al. (2019) showed a positive, direct, and significant relationship between job performance and job toughness, job autonomy, and self-assessment-centeredness. Barari, Ansari, and Akbarzadeh (2019) stated that job autonomy is an essential and influential element in teachers' job performance, and as teachers' autonomy increases, so does their job performance. Shirbegi, Bolandhemmatan, and Tadinisangani (2017) reported that teachers evaluated their degree of autonomy in identity creation, parental engagement, professional development, and extracurricular subjects as below average in terms of teaching and evaluation of academic achievement as average, and the areas of curriculum change and growth as above average. Ghanbari et al. (2016) pointed out that job autonomy has a positive, significant effect on individual learning, organizational learning, individual performance, and organizational performance. Maleki and Ghorbanian (2014) found a positive, significant relationship between employees' professional performance and the dimensions of empowerment, particularly autonomy. Yukal et al. (2021) stated that teacher autonomy and school atmosphere could predict teaching goal orientation dimensions. Yildiz et al. (2020) also found a positive, significant relationship between teacher

motivation and curriculum autonomy levels. Yolcu & Vural (2020) found a four-dimensional scale (autonomy, process autonomy, evaluation autonomy, and planning autonomy) for teachers' autonomy. Derakhshan et al. (2020) demonstrated a positive, significant relationship between all three factors of autonomy, professional identity, and teacher success.

Thus, the identity and autonomy of teachers significantly contribute to their success. Worth and Van Den Brande (2020) stated that average teachers have a lower autonomy level than their professional peers. Teachers' autonomy in proportion to their professional development goals is low and it is most associated with higher job satisfaction. Da Silvia and Molstede (2020) found that teacher autonomy and teacher mission were positively correlated with teachers' motivation and commitment to teaching. Brazilian teachers also have a limited scope of action and opportunities to achieve their mission compared to their Norwegian counterparts. Wermke, Rick, and Salokangas (2019) showed that teacher autonomy is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that occurs in educational, social, professional development, and administrative fields and at different levels of the classroom, school, and profession. Schwimmer and Maxwell (2017) stated that in the teachers' charter of ethics, there are three basic conditions to help the teacher avoid following the preconceived norms and have a favorable independent judgment, including broadness of purpose, creating space for opposition, and avoiding moral language. Wang and Hu (2015) found that job autonomy, including personal satisfaction (assisting colleagues) and organizational benefits to the organization's goal and growth,

affects organizational knowledge-sharing behaviors. Vartaraj et al. (2015) demonstrated that teacher autonomy in the curriculum has a positive, significant effect on students' explicit learning, autonomy, and performance.

The orientation of teachers' goals for teaching shapes educational environments and is linked to the in-school process in different ways. On the other hand, the curriculum and teachers' teaching autonomy are also related to their goal orientation. In addition, the school atmosphere formed by the behaviors of teachers, students, and principals influences goal orientation regarding teaching. Therefore, teachers' autonomy behavior and perception of the school atmosphere affect their goal orientations for teaching (Yusil, Ali, & Esra, 2021). Consequently, given the status quo in the education system of Iran, where the education system is centralized, and the predominant form of content is in the form of textbooks in all parts of the country with a clear list of contents, teachers as faithful executors are only responsible for and focus on the full implementation of the curriculum based on the teacher's manual that includes goals, prescribed teaching methods, teaching materials and tools, specific teaching time for each lesson, and how to evaluate students. Considering this limited structure, what is the teacher autonomy model and its components?

Therefore, to achieve the objectives of the present study, the following questions were posed:

- 1- What are the causal conditions for teacher autonomy?
- 2- What are the facilitating and interfering factors in teacher autonomy?
- 3- What are the strategies used by teachers for autonomy?

4- What are the consequences of teacher autonomy?

### **Research Background of the Study**

Schools always search for the best teachers because they consider student success to depend on their instruction. Teaching is facilitated and enhanced by collaboration between students and teachers. Teachers are the key to providing quality education. In science, there has been increasing attention to teacher autonomy, which appears to be a relatively new and multifaceted concept (Yu-hong & Ting, 2012).

Studies on teacher autonomy play a key role in the development of educational environments, and the theoretical literature on teacher autonomy focuses on conceptualization studies. Correlation studies focus on relationships between a variety of variables, and qualitative studies zero in on a more specific dimension of teacher autonomy, namely curriculum autonomy, which comprises activities such as curriculum decisions, curriculum organization, selection of teaching methods, and student evaluation (Vangrieken, Grosemans, Docky, & Kyndt, 2017).

Teacher autonomy refers to authority and freedom in the teaching profession. These authorities include making important professional decisions, having authority in the workplace, lesson planning, and participation in administrative processes. In fact, teacher autonomy represents a balanced structure with other components of the education system that emphasizes and focuses on innovation, collaboration, and sharing of experiences. Concerning teachers' duties and responsibilities, their autonomy can be classified based on educational autonomy, administrative autonomy, financial

autonomy, personal autonomy, and professional development. These components of teacher autonomy refer to their authority in the teaching process in the classroom. Still, participation in school management and administration includes participation in financial decisions in the classroom, school, personal development, and professional development.

For this reason, teacher autonomy can be defined as the freedom to make decisions about the curriculum and materials and to participate in the management of the school and other activities related to this profession (Canbolat, 2020). Teacher autonomy acts as an agent for innovation in teacher education and continuous teacher professional development. Teacher autonomy allows teachers to reconstruct teaching and learning ideas with their peers, make these ideas more realistic, and identify unique teaching-learning opportunities to find new solutions to problems. On the other hand, curriculum autonomy is considered a subset of teacher autonomy in the literature (Gokhan & Ozblen, 2021). Thus, teacher autonomy includes three main elements: lesson planning and teaching, active participation in school management decision-making processes, and the development of professional knowledge and skills (Ozterk, 2011).

Teacher autonomy is defined as professional freedom of action. In other words, it is the voluntary freedom to organize one's work (Ranhar et al., 2013). In fact, employees should have job autonomy and practical freedom in planning work time, determining work procedures, and controlling their work. Autonomy is a sense of control over various matters and aspects of work and professional life. Whether managers or

employees have the right to choose their career goals and methods, as well as how much they can decide independently, is related to the autonomy in their profession (Robbins, as quoted in Danaifard, 2011). Autonomy refers to the feeling of having choice and control over work. Employees' need for autonomy includes the right to choose at work (Fook, Chang, Ayu, & Hai, 2011). Teacher autonomy involves teachers' self-discipline and autonomy in performing tasks according to process, decision-making, and time management (Song, Ulem, & Kane, 2012).

Teacher autonomy has increased over the past two decades among educators, policymakers, administrators, and practitioners with regard to all school subjects. Autonomy is a complex phenomenon with philosophical, psychological, sociological, and historical-political aspects that, as a proxy concept, shows the curriculum approach in the education system (Aras, Colmius, & Etio, 2016). Patterson and Hall (1993) argued that teacher autonomy consists of two dimensions: 1) general autonomy, in terms of standards of classroom behavior and authority in the workplace, and 2) curriculum autonomy, which includes the selection of activities, teaching materials, and lesson planning. Smith and Erdogan (2008) then expanded this concept by adding learning orientation and control to these dimensions (as quoted in Wermke, Olason, & Salokangas, 2019). Eventually, three more dimensions were added to teacher autonomy: 1) the capacity for self-directed and professional action or emphasis on teaching responsibility, 2) the capacity for self-management and professional development, and 3) freedom from the control and supervision of colleagues

and others about the previous two dimensions. (Haapaniemi, Vanalainen, Malin, & Palojoki, 2021).

### **The nature Nature of autonomyAutonomy**

The term autonomy semantically means "independence" or "self-management" (Desi, 2006). Autonomy is an individual's ability to express thoughts about their choices and actions (Yolcu & Akar-Vural, 2020). In education, autonomy is defined as the capacity of individual independent learning, and teacher autonomy as freedom in learning and teaching (Sehrawat, 2014).

A professional person refers to someone very skilled in their job or profession. The autonomy of quality control officials includes the freedom to act professionally without interference or intimidation. (Ying et al., 2012). Autonomy is the key to organizational flexibility and creativity, which is essential to adapt to changing environments. Without autonomy, organizations turn into rigid environments. In fact, according to Gonorg, what should be examined and improved in the control process is autonomy (Danaeifard, 2012).

There are different types of autonomy: a) autonomy in scheduling work, b) autonomy in decision-making and c) autonomy in executive procedures. First, autonomy in scheduling work means scheduling a time to do things by employees. This autonomy is somehow implemented in companies where employees are greatly allowed to plan and schedule their work themselves. However, in some positions, this scheduling autonomy has been drastically reduced and even dictated by other units, such as the research and development unit (Wendel, 2018). Second, autonomy in decision-making refers to the freedom to act in decisions and methods for different work processes made by the organizations'

personnel. This dimension of autonomy in companies is also very limited for employees as most of them are obliged to act according to the rules and instructions of the company based upon their job description. Third, autonomy in executive procedures is basically the freedom of action in executive operations performed by the end user of that process. This parameter is not observed in companies and is resisted by senior managers, even though they acknowledge employees' autonomy in the organization (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

### **Characteristics of Autonomy**

Autonomy has the following characteristics: 1) Individuals can determine their actions, 2) they can perform the actions they have determined properly, 3) their actions and decisions are based on deep thinking, 4) their actions and decisions are consistent with the set of internal principles that they believe in, and 5) external factors do not limit their decisions (Taghinejad et al., 2012).

### **Factors Affecting Autonomy**

Various studies in the field of job satisfaction show that many variables are correlated to autonomy, which can generally be classified into four groups: a) Organizational factors, b) contextual factors, c) the nature of the job, and d) individual factors. The first group of variables is called organizational factors. Among the organizational factors contributing to autonomy are salary, promotions, and organizational policies. Studies show that salary is a determining factor in autonomy, especially when it is fair and equitable for the employee. Moreover, promotions include positive changes in pay (higher pay), less supervision, more work challenges, more responsibility, and freedom of decision. As promotion reflects the value of the individual to the organization, especially at higher levels, a person's promotion leads to an increase

in their morale. One of the most consistent findings is that the higher the level of employment, the greater the autonomy will be because individuals often have the propensity to be promoted in their jobs. Hence, a solution should be considered, and different levels should be provided in the form of a logical process to increase organizations' autonomy. Regarding organizational policies, it is argued that the bureaucratic structure is unsuitable for a person with a democratic leadership style. Inflexible policies provoke negative job emotions, and by contrast, flexible policies lead to autonomy (Green, 2013).

The second set of variables is referred to as contextual factors, which include: a) Supervision style, b) working groups, and c) favorable working conditions. Wherever supervisors have been supportive and friendly with employees, autonomy has been high. On the other hand, the size of the group and the quality of personal interactions in the group play an important role in employee satisfaction. The working group as a community provides a supportive-emotional system for employees. If individuals in a group have similar social characteristics (similar attitudes and beliefs), they create an atmosphere in which autonomy is provided. Finally, favorable working conditions cause autonomy because, in favorable working conditions, better physical and mental comfort is provided for the person (Wendel, 2018).

The third type of variable is discussed under the nature of the job. The job by itself has a key role in determining the level of autonomy. The content of the job has two aspects, namely, the scope and the diversity of the job. The former includes the level of responsibility, work actions, and feedback. The broader these factors are, the larger the scope of the job will be, which in turn increases autonomy.

On the other hand, the diversity of the job is opposed to simple and uniform specialized work. Staff favors jobs that tap into their mental capacity and allow them to use their skills, experience, creativity, taste, and talent. Such jobs also satisfy a number of their needs and help them understand themselves. However, research shows moderate work diversity is more effective, while excessive diversity causes ambiguity and stress. At the other end of the spectrum, low diversity leads to monotony and fatigue, leading to a lack of autonomy (Xu & Dellaportas, 2019).

The fourth group of variables correlated with autonomy is individual factors. While the external environment of the organization and the nature of the job are the determining factors in autonomy, the traits and characteristics of the individual also play a crucial role in it. People have a generally negative attitude always complain about anything related to the job. Regardless of the job, they are always looking for an excuse to complain. Age, seniority, and background also have a significant impact on autonomy. Senior employees

in organizations expect to be more satisfied with their job.

Further, the staff usually cannot separate their private lives from their work. Therefore in the event of problems outside the workplace, the effect of those problems in the workplace is manifested in the form of restlessness and lack of concentration. Clever supervisors and officials can greatly help alleviate personnel problems by recognizing their problems and taking measures to resolve them. (Marquadt, 2009).

### Research Methodology

This research is developmental in terms of purpose. The population of this research in the first phase consisted of all sources in the literature related to the autonomy of teachers worldwide. A number of high-caliber research papers in scientific databases, documents, and books were sampled purposefully. The second phase included all teachers and principals in the Lorestan province, Iran primary schools. In this study, semi-structured interviews with 27 people including primary school teachers and principals were conducted according to the research background and using the purposive sampling method

**Table 1. Participants' demographic information**

Variable	Statistic	Number
Gender	Male	15
	Female	12
Education	MA	22
	Ph.D.	5
Type of school	Magnet school	4
	Public school	19
	Private school	2
	Gifted school	2
Teaching experience	6	6
	20-30 years	20
	30-40 years	1

The research instrument was the semi-structured interview. The interview protocol included 10 open questions, including:

1. How is professional autonomy defined, in your opinion? Or what is your perception of professional autonomy as a teacher?



2. In your opinion, in what cases should a teacher have professional autonomy?

3. What has been your experience as a teacher in the years of teaching regarding professional autonomy?

4. What are the necessary conditions for the professional autonomy of teachers?"

5. In your opinion, what are the components of a teacher's professional autonomy?

6. What requirements (individual and organizational) are necessary for the implementation of the professional autonomy of teachers?

7. What do you think (the centralized structure of the education system, the culture, and atmosphere of the school, the politicization of the educational system) affects the professional autonomy of teachers?

8. What are the factors affecting the professional autonomy of teachers?

9. To what extent have you been able to operationalize professional autonomy in your field of work?

10. What are the consequences of teachers' professional autonomy? Or what positive and negative consequences can professional autonomy have?

Quotations from interviewees are given to evaluate and validate the data and findings. Considering the collected data types, they have been examined and analyzed using the grounded theory. In this study, data from semi-structured

interviews with participants were collected and analyzed in three stages open, axial, and selective coding.

### **Findings**

According to the results of the analysis and coding of interviews, the components and teacher autonomy were initially identified in the first stage based on various sources (scientific databases and existing sources). In the second stage, to answer the qualitative questions of the research, grounded theory was used, which seeks to develop a theory from rigorously studying the text of interviews, coding them, and creating codes and categories. Therefore, in this process, after interviewing the participants and collecting the data, open coding was first performed. The interview protocol questions were designed in four dimensions: causal conditions, background and interfering conditions, strategy, and consequences.

Question 1: What are the causal conditions for teacher autonomy?

Data obtained from the interviewees were analyzed using a coding process based on grounded theory. The coding and data analysis process was performed in three stages open, axial, and selective coding. Findings obtained from coding the causal conditions for teacher autonomy included four axial codes, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Codes extracted from interviews regarding causal conditions**

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Transforming the teacher into a learning individual, changing the role of the teacher to one of the instructors, redefining the nature and role of the teacher in school, properly defining the nature of the teacher at the macro level, maintaining the position of the teacher	Redefining the role and position of the teacher	Teacher hegemony over the educational process
Increasing intellectual skills in teachers, improving the educational process, enhancing individual abilities as well as the level of teachers' skills and knowledge, creating a sense of necessity for autonomy in teachers, avoiding weakening the teacher's morale, focusing on non-educational matters, living standards, creating proper organizational attitude, creating a proper individual attitude, creating a sense of necessity for having autonomy in teachers	Prioritizing autonomy	
The need for support of the highest levels of the education system, the need to follow the models of developed countries, creating top-down support, important documents, formulating strict laws, job security, supporting the education system policy, promoting Farhangian University, school stakeholders, a centralized structure that weakens autonomy, decentralization, defining macro educational objectives by involving teachers	Creating top-down support	
Improper teacher recruitment - inefficiency of current in-service courses, incompatibility of centralized structure with autonomy, teacher irresponsibility in a centralized structure, turning schools into centers of power	Creating professional development	

The findings in Table 1 obtained from the qualitative analysis of the causal factors of autonomy showed that the following four axial codes constitute the causal conditions dimension for teacher autonomy: 1) Redefining the role and position of the teacher (5 open codes), 2) prioritizing autonomy (12 open codes), 3) creating top-down support (12 open codes), and 4) creating professional development (5 open codes). These four axial codes were coded in the form of a selective code called 'teacher hegemony over the educational process'. They were identified as the leading category in a more abstract concept of 'school-centeredness.' Causal conditions refer to the factors that directly play a role in achieving teacher autonomy. Redefining the role and position of the teacher from

the perspective of the participants in the research can create new organizational tasks for the teacher in education. Teachers have often transferred knowledge and acted as facilitators in implementing centralized curricula so far. Still, they can engage students in learning as a classroom instructor if they have autonomy. This level of change requires top-down support in the education system. Without such support, one cannot expect teacher autonomy to be prioritized as a necessity. The opinion of interviewee (12) in this regard was as follows:

Excessive top-down monitoring of teachers, not encouraging autonomous teachers, wrong yardsticks to choose a model teacher, paperwork and forcing teachers to accumulate evidence, interfering in matters such as dress by

the authorities, teachers hiding for fear of not being fired, teachers having been burned out and exhausted who have to pretend to keep high-ranking officials satisfied, the conflict between teachers’ professional personality and normal personality, wrong selection of teachers in recruitment, teachers choosing this job as a last resort to make ends meet, and so forth.

Question 2: What are the background and interfering factors of teacher autonomy.

Table 2: Codes extracted from interviews regarding the background dimension

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Increasing personal abilities, continuous professional development, having research skills, proper training and preparation of teachers, resolving teachers' financial challenges, involving teachers in preparing textbooks, teacher professional development, giving teachers the right to choose top principals, creating friendly collaboration between educational and administrative levels, integration of experience and theoretical knowledge, attracting extra-organizational collaborations	Improving the academic and personality dimensions of the teacher	Empowering teachers
Decreasing inspections and top-down controls, replacing control with supervision, creating a coaching atmosphere instead of control, decreasing coercion and control, prioritizing students' talents, independence from organizational factors, and creating job commitment	Establishment of an educational guidance and supervision system	

According to Table 2, the following underlying factors were obtained: 1) Improving the academic and personality dimensions of the teacher (11 open codes) and 2) establishment of an educational guidance and supervision system (7 open codes). The two axial codes were conceptualized as a selective code called ‘empowering teachers’ and finally coded as the main category of ‘teacher professional development’. The context and background dimension refer to the factors that indirectly affect the realization of autonomy. In other words, these factors provide the necessary conditions and context for achieving teacher professional development. Empowering teachers provides the basis for their autonomy because, despite the reforms in the centralized structure and giving authority to the teacher in the process of teaching and determining the content, it is not possible for teachers to have the necessary authority and power and create autonomy if the teacher is not empowered, is not able to decide independently in terms of skills and expertise, and has not gained the necessary knowledge for teaching. In this regard, the opinion of the interviewee (7) was as follows:

“First of all, the teacher's professional competence must be approved, and then he or she can be given autonomy in managing the class and choosing different teaching methods... The teacher should not depend on the content of the book or be under the supervision of the authors of the textbooks... The first necessary condition for teacher autonomy is freedom in preparing and teaching the course content... Increasing knowledge and participating in in-service

programs... Preserving the dignity of teachers.”

**Table 3: Codes extracted from interviews regarding interfering factors**

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
School management style, weakening the position and self-esteem of teachers, appointment of transformation-oriented managers, the need for a specialized certificate in teaching, resolving teachers' financial problems, prioritizing creating happiness in schools, formulating school-centered rules, creating conditions for teachers to further their education, establishing a meritocracy system	School management styles	Managerial and financial support
Providing educational facilities and educational assistance, economic and financial factors, proper and continuous communication with stakeholder organizations, correct budgeting, providing adequate funding for schools	Financial conditions	

The findings in Table 3, which were obtained from the qualitative analysis of the interfering factors of teacher autonomy, show that two axial codes of school management styles (9 open codes) and financial conditions (5 open codes) are conceptualized as a selective code called ‘managerial and financial support’. Finally, the main category, entitled ‘creating support and value levels’, was a concept that semantically encompassed all the components extracted from this dimension. The intervening factors refer to the factors that affect the context. The school principal's management style will be a very influential if it supports teacher autonomy. Similarly, financial and economic conditions, pertaining to the amount of organizational budget and the amount of teacher salaries, are determining factors in creating teachers' commitment to their profession. Therefore, from the perspective of the

participants in this study, who have all been experts and active in this field, managerial styles and the amount of financial support that the education system provides for education and teachers play a mediating role in achieving teacher autonomy in education. In this regard, the interviewee (1) acknowledged that:

Today the economy is a prerequisite in any field. That is, unless the financial autonomy of a teacher is provided, the autonomy of education loses its efficiency... Undoubtedly, financial needs come before the classes and training courses based on new books... Management agents should be receptive to teachers' comments and suggestions... Entrusting school management to competent principals....

Question 3: What are the strategies related to teacher autonomy?

**Table 4: Codes extracted from interviews regarding the strategy dimension**

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Integrating the experience and theoretical knowledge, creating theories related to the context, teaching teachers self-empowerment, creating conditions for teachers to further their education, formulating school-centered rules, increasing specialized authority, recruiting teachers with specialized qualifications, replacing the vertical structure with the horizontal structure, creating learner-centered classes	Creating school-centered policies	Creating learning-centered structures
Teacher irresponsibility in a centralized structure, turning schools into centers of power, the need for support of the education system at high levels, the need to emulate developed countries, honing intellectual skills in teachers, improving the education process, inefficiency of current in-service programs, the centralized structure weakening the autonomy, giving the teacher the authority to choose the content	Structural reforms	
Promoting the position of teachers by establishing a horizontal structure, creating a collaborative atmosphere and group work, the need for transformation in the education system, creating the right attitudes to the teaching profession, the need for cooperation at macro levels, increasing organizational facilities	Creating a culture of collective work	
Establishing a suitable evaluation system for teacher performance, reforming the budgeting system, eliminating unnecessary content, and the role of stakeholders in creating teacher autonomy	Reforming the evaluation system	
Creating learning schools, creating a school-centered culture, transforming schools into learner organizations, creating a collaborative and encouraging atmosphere, turning schools into centers of power, creating interest in and commitment to the teacher role, achieving systemic thinking, reforming macro policies and attitudes toward teachers, redefining the role of the teacher and its position, reforming and codifying laws consistent with the nature of education	Transforming schools into learner organizations	
Organizational tolerance, providing adequate information resources to the teacher, providing educational facilities and learning aids, the right to select top principals by teachers, creating a partnership between educational and administrative levels, creating an atmosphere of criticism of senior management levels, attracting extra-organizational cooperation, proper and continuous communication with stakeholder organizations, creating coordination between different organizational roles	Creating dynamic and non-linear communication in the organization	
Having knowledge of educational psychology, creating intrinsic motivation, creating complementary autonomy skills, identifying the components of autonomy through research, promoting the position of research in education, determining policy boundaries in the education system	Reducing the gap between theory and practice	

As seen in Table 4, it was found that there are seven axial codes concerning autonomy strategy: 1) Creating school-centered policies (9 open codes), 2) structural reforms (9 open codes), 3) creating a culture of collective work (6 open codes), 4) reforming the evaluation system (4 open codes), 5) turning schools into learner organizations (11 open codes), 6) creating dynamic and non-linear communication in the organization (9 open codes), and 7) reducing the gap between theory and practice (6 open codes). These seven axial codes were grouped into an abstract concept called 'creating learning-centered structures', which was in turn conceptualized as the main category of 'creating inverted structures'.

The axial codes in the strategy dimension refer to implementing programs to create teacher autonomy. From the participants' point of view, reforming policies in the education system and directing these policies toward a school-centered education system can be the most critical practical strategy. Furthermore, structural reforms of the education system can help achieve teacher autonomy in that a policy change means a change in the hierarchy of power and authority. The third axial code is to create a culture of collective work. The path to autonomy is through increasing the knowledge and ability of the teacher. Suppose teachers are engaged with issues such as instruction research that encourages them to share knowledge with colleagues, and engender a more collectivist culture in schools. In that case, the realization of teacher autonomy will be facilitated.

In addition, reforming the evaluation system is another axial code to create autonomy, as mentioned by the participants. The current evaluation system for recruiting or measuring the quality of teachers' performance uses a

quantitative approach, which cannot assess the qualitative dimensions of teachers' performance and abilities. Therefore, reforming the evaluation system will help to select talented pre-service individuals and to evaluate in-service teachers accurately. The transformation of schools into learner organizations is another component for which the components above are prerequisites. Learning schools are created by autonomous learning teachers.

Moreover, creating dynamic and non-linear communication in the organization is the next code, which indicates that it is impossible to achieve autonomy in hierarchical schools with formal relations and bureaucracy. Finally, reducing the gap between theory and practice is the last axial code, according to which failure to apply research results can be an obstacle to achieving autonomy. The necessity will not arise if there is no strong link between the decisions made at various levels of the education system and the research conducted in this area. According to the interviewee (3):

Freedom of action is vital. The hierarchy creates problems. High-ranking people and officials who are not experts in their profession and only focus on teachers' weaknesses... The education system must change fundamentally, and teachers must be given enough authority in the profession... Assisting them in resolving the teacher's problems, creating a calm atmosphere away from political tastes... Strengthening the school-centeredness on the individual level and making decisions within the Ministry of Education on the organizational level. Political factions should not be involved in decisions made in the Ministry of Education.

Question 4: What are the consequences of teacher autonomy?

**Table 5: Codes extracted from interviews regarding the consequences dimension**

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Boosting teachers' confidence, transforming teachers into educational leaders, creating professional skills, preparing and training teachers for content creation, lack of coordination in uniform content instruction, autonomy in the form of official laws by the Ministry of Education, increasing job motivation, applying teaching-research skills, transforming teachers into professional teachers, more mastery in teaching	Transforming the teacher into an educational specialist	Achieving the macro goals of education
Making fundamental changes in the education system, promoting the position of teachers, revering science and knowledge, creating an independent identity for teachers, providing teachers with opportunities to excel, going beyond limited information, eliminating plagiarism, lack of conditions for creating autonomy, improving the scientific and research level of society, optimal use of educational budget, reducing external control	Promoting the status of science and knowledge	
Creating soft regulations, teaching subjects related to student needs, sharing knowledge, creating conditions for realizing autonomy, making instructions practical, enhancing the quality of education, eliminating strict non-academic behaviors	Creating a sense of joy and motivation to learn	
Engendering greater fun, creating a culture based on knowledge, creating a scientific mentality, increasing vitality in school, making students active, enhancing the quality of learning	Development and progress of society	

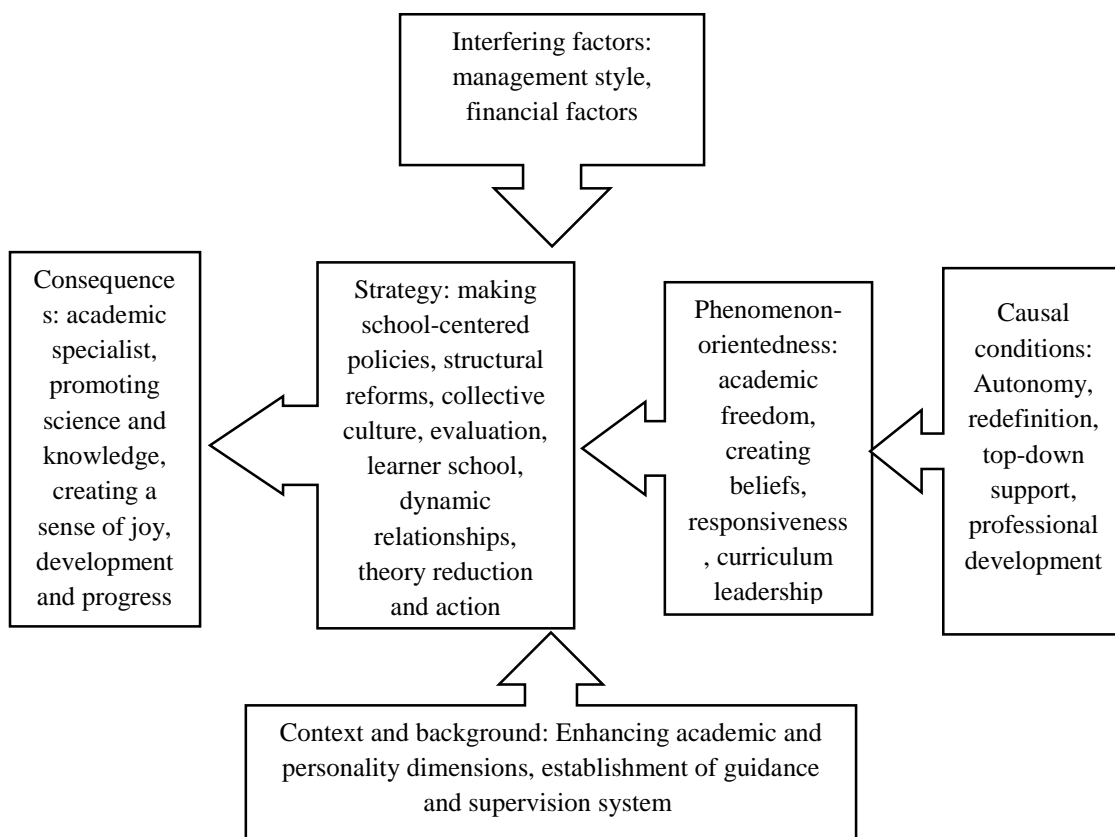
As shown in Table 5, which presents the results of the qualitative analysis related to the consequences of teacher autonomy, the following four axial codes were extracted: 1) Transforming the teacher into an educational specialist (with 10 open codes), 2) promoting the status of science and knowledge (16 open codes), 3) creating a sense of joy and motivation to learn (6 open codes), and 4) development and progress of society (6 open codes). In the selective coding stage, improving the teaching-learning process had the highest validity and semantic similarity with the axial codes, which was named in the main category as "achieving the macro goals of education." Autonomy makes the teacher more specialized, enhancing the value of knowledge and science.

Expertise in performing a task allows professional skills to be used to the highest degree. A professional teacher who can create enthusiasm for learning and a sense of happiness in students will increase the effectiveness of schools and, thus, the progress and development of the whole society. In this regard, the interviewees mentioned:

Teacher autonomy can lead to the development of scientific and educational talents and instill a mindset to accept criticism and do research in students. Otherwise, we have witnessed disrespect for science and knowledge in all educational matters. It has become so entrenched that high school students ask their math teacher to say the price for a passing grade... Certainly, the autonomy of teachers will lead to various positive

results. Considering students' individual needs, talents, and interests, at least their lives will not be wasted, and they will be relieved of memorizing useless subjects and become more productive...

The results of the qualitative phase were categorized in the form of 191 open codes, 23 axial codes, and 6 selective codes, which were used to design a theoretical model from the context (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Theoretical model using the grounded theory extracted in the qualitative phase**

It is important to note that to achieve a comprehensive model of teacher autonomy, a consensus on the concept and components of teacher autonomy from the perspective of researchers in the field was reached through examining the literature. Then common as well as novel components related to the research context were identified. Accordingly, in this study, at first, the components derived from the related literature were listed in Tables (1-5). Then the common components, as well as non-common

components identified in this study, were mentioned. Tables 1-5 presented eight components mentioned by other experts in the field, including autonomy in teaching and support of the principal (Ingersol, 2015), autonomy in decision-making (Yildiz et al., 2020), autonomy in the teaching and learning process (Yolcu & Vural, 2020), autonomy in controlling (Da Silvia & Molstede, 2020), autonomy in evaluation (Porter, 1989), having professional skills and expertise (Stockard, 2014), creating



attitude (Derakhshan et al., 2020), and autonomy in curriculum, education, assessment, student behavior, and classroom environment (Worth & Vanderbrand, 2020; Wermke, Rick & Salokangas, 2019; Wang & Hu, 2015). These components are consistent with several components extracted from the analysis of interviews. In contrast, some other components obtained from the interviews do not fall into this category and can be considered novel components and new findings of this study.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study was conducted to semantically represent teacher autonomy using the grounded theory. According to the data analysis, the model of teacher autonomy includes four axial codes of freedom in educational affairs, creation of professional beliefs and values, empowerment and accountability, and curriculum leadership, which were conceptualized in a more abstract concept called professional specialty because these four axial codes are the characteristics of a specialized and professional job that includes autonomy. Therefore, it can be inferred that autonomy in this study refers to the characteristics of a specialized profession through which teachers can achieve autonomy. In contrast, if they do not have such features, they cannot be claimed to be autonomous teachers.

The causal conditions of the model of teacher autonomy had four axial codes, the first of which was defining the organizational role and position of the teacher. Since causal conditions refer to conditions that cause a phenomenon, these concepts will be discussed as the existential cause of autonomy. The teacher in the education system is known as an executor who is responsible for

implementing the centralized curriculum and is located at the lowest level of this structure. This role contradicts the nature of teacher autonomy in that autonomy has a specialized and independent nature that is not compatible with the teacher as a mere executor. Accordingly, to achieve this, a redefinition of the role and position of the teacher must be done to eliminate this conceptual contradiction. Granting authority and freedom to the teacher is not useful unless his or her position and role become specialized. Prioritizing autonomy was another causal condition, according to which having autonomy at work should be considered obligatory. Without autonomy and freedom in practice, the nature of the teaching job becomes distorted. Therefore, if teachers have less autonomy in the current structure, it is due to failure to prioritize it for the teacher. Creating top-down support was the third axial code in this regard. If teacher autonomy is to change in the education system, support of high levels is necessary to make any changes in the centralized structures, for the reason that power is concentrated at the highest levels of the structure. Thus the lower levels need to receive power and change permission from the power source. Therefore, top-down support is one of the causes of the realization of autonomy. This finding is consistent with Wendell's (2018), Wermke, Rick & Salokangas's (2019) view, which states that wherever supervisors and top managers have been supportive and friendly to individuals, autonomy has also been high. The last axial code in this regard was professional development. Unless a person becomes an expert in a profession, autonomy cannot be beneficial for them. These four axial codes were grouped in the form of a

selective code called teacher hegemony over the educational process, meaning educational leadership. A teacher can act as an educational leader, provided that they achieve autonomy. In this study, according to the components mentioned in the section on causal conditions, leading teachers' educational process is considered the reason for their autonomy.

Another dimension that was examined in the qualitative phase was background and context. Data analysis resulted in two components: improving the teacher's scientific and personality dimensions and establishing a guidance and supervision system. Improving the scientific and personality dimensions of the teacher was identified as a basis for achieving their autonomy. If scientific and specialized courses are offered to teachers, they can improve their scientific ability and personality dimensions, which will pave the way for them to achieve autonomy. Autonomy is useful to teachers with an acceptable level of knowledge and expertise. If the education system provides such a platform to train educated and up-to-date teachers, it will pave the way for them to achieve autonomy. The second axial code in this dimension was establishing a guidance and supervision system. What is known today in the education system as monitoring the educational process is an evaluation system that inspects and controls. If supervision and guidance are used instead of control in evaluating the teacher's performance, the teacher's position as an expert will be maintained. In the same vein, if control and inspection, which degrades the teacher's position, are avoided, the foundation for teacher autonomy can be laid. In other words, in a system of supervision and guidance, the teacher

can overcome their shortcomings and improve the quality of their teaching with the help of a trainer, and as a result, teacher autonomy will be facilitated. These two axial codes were conceptualized as a selective code called teacher empowerment. Teacher empowerment as a process that can form the basis for teacher autonomy was approved by the participants in this study. Empowering teachers create the necessary competencies for them to gain autonomy.

The next dimension in the proposed model, interfering factors, includes school management styles and financial conditions. The principal, as the person who guides and supports teachers, can pave the way for teacher autonomy. If the school principal uses supportive and distributive styles and, in general, the styles that give the teacher the necessary power and authority, he or she can create the conditions needed for teachers to achieve autonomy. Financial status and the degree of government financial support for the education system is other interfering factor that provides the budget required for continuously holding in-service courses and training courses for teacher autonomy on a large scale. These two factors, as interfering factors, have an essential role in realizing this phenomenon, without which achieving autonomy will be difficult.

The fifth dimension in the conceptual model, teacher autonomy strategies, consisted of seven axial codes. Creating school-centered policies is the first axial code extracted in the strategy dimension. The fact that the school should be at the heart of the education system is an issue to which developed countries pay great attention. Creating school-centered policies is the most important factor in

removing barriers to teacher autonomy. The current education system structure indicates that teachers as executive forces are at the lowest level of the hierarchical structure, where there is rarely a power distribution.

Consequently, in such a structure, when an executive role is generated for the teacher, it is impossible to have independent decisions, sufficient authority, and consequently autonomy. Similarly, in this system, it is on student needs. The second axial code was structural reform, which was identified as a strategy for achieving autonomy. Lack of authority and freedom on the part of teachers is at odds with teacher autonomy. If the hierarchical structure of the education system does not change and becomes more horizontal, the realization of teacher autonomy will be difficult. This finding is consistent with Green's (2013) observation, *ich* stated that a bureaucratic structure is unsuitable for a person with a democratic leadership style. Inflexible policies lead to negative job emotions, whereas flexible policies result in autonomy. Creating a culture of collective work was another axial code that referred to the development of collective behaviors between teachers and other people in the school. That teachers' acting as professionals, sharing knowledge, and teamwork are a necessity may seem to contradict autonomy. The nature of teamwork, however, refers to a culture of participation that will make teaching and learning dynamic. Developing a culture of teamwork is a strategy to increase teachers' knowledge and thus achieve autonomy.

The fourth axial code was the reform of the evaluation system. This concept refers to the system of evaluation and selection of teachers and the evaluation

of their in-service performance. The in-service teacher evaluation process is a centralized evaluation system that utilizes the same indices for everyone. Therefore, if competent and talented teachers are to be identified, the current criteria need to be modified. Rich, Lepin, and Crawford (2010), Gokhan & Ozblen (2021) considered giving individuals the power to choose among different evaluation criteria as an essential component of autonomy. He believed that the ability to select criteria reflects the highest degree of employee autonomy. The fifth axial code about the strategy dimension was the transformation of schools into learner organizations. The concept of learner organizations refers to prioritizing learning for all school members. In advanced education systems, the teacher has the role of a guide in students' education, and the teacher in this role is also a learner. Everyone in the school, from the principal to the student, is considered a lifelong learner.

Creating dynamic and non-linear communication in the organization is another axial code that is considered a strategy to achieve autonomy. Non-linear communication refers to informal communication in which individuals in an organization, regardless of position, can exchange information and knowledge and create an intimate atmosphere. As is clear from the mission of schools, education is their ultimate goal. Moreover, intimate communication leads to sharing knowledge and a collaborative atmosphere, the relationship of which with autonomy was discussed in the previous section. Informal relationships will also help the teacher know more about students' living conditions and establish more communication with

parents to assess learner needs more accurately. This can be helpful to the teacher who wishes to determine part of the content based on student needs. As a result, the teacher can better achieve autonomy in such an environment.

Reducing the gap between theory and practice was the last axial code concerning the strategy dimension. This concept concerns the failure to apply theories and knowledge produced by researchers to decision-making and problem-solving.

Nevertheless, problems and challenges today are complex, and solving them requires using the latest scientific findings. Therefore, to develop autonomy, the latest relevant findings ought to be reviewed and used in order should be reviewed and used to hold courses or make decisions in this area. Some studies have attributed the failure of plans and decisions to the gap between knowledge and practice. This component can be essential in implementing programs to achieve teacher autonomy. The reason for naming this concept was that when the structure of the education system is learning-centered, all human, process, physical, financial, and spiritual dimensions are affected by it. In other words, all the axial codes in this dimension refer to the characteristics of an organization with an inverted structure in which the teacher and student are at the highest organizational level, and the teacher as a professional has the highest level of authority. Only in such a structure can the path to autonomy be paved for the teacher.

The last dimension of the teacher autonomy model was the consequences dimension, which deals with the consequences of realizing autonomy. Four axial codes were extracted from

qualitative data analysis, the first of which was to transform the teacher into an expert. That the role of the teacher changes from a curriculum administrator to a specialist in the teaching-learning process presupposes that the teacher has autonomy. If the teacher is viewed as an expert and not an executor, then it is natural and necessary to grant him or her sufficient authority and power. On the other hand, if the teacher is recognized at the lowest level of the education system as an executor to implement plans and decisions, giving them the autonomy to make decisions is unnecessary. The second axial code in the consequences dimension was promoting the status of science and knowledge. Teachers' autonomy promotes their position as an expert in society, and thus teachers, who impart science and knowledge, will have a higher status. Creating a sense of joy and motivation to learn was the third axial code in the consequences dimension. Learning in schools is compulsory from students' point of view, which leads to a lack of joy, motivation, and enthusiasm for learning. When a teacher is granted autonomy and authority, he or she will feel more passionate about teaching, and this passion will also be transmitted to students. This finding is consistent with Ghanbari et al. (2016), who stated that employees' autonomy promotes learning and contributes to knowledge sharing in the workplace. The last axial code in the consequences dimension was the development and progress of society. As previously mentioned, students' desire to learn increases and they are guided toward the right career path in the future in the light of autonomous and motivated teachers so that society can benefit talented and capable human resources in all dimensions. Such a society will

progress faster because its education system is in the hands of teachers with the highest level of autonomy and, as experts, can guide people toward the right career path. In the selective coding stage, the concept of 'achieving the macro goals of education' had the highest validity and semantic similarity with the axial codes.

There were limitations in conducting this research, such as the lack of familiarity of some of the participants in this study with some scientific terms in the field of teachers' professional independence, which will increase the possibility of reducing the validity of the answers to the questions. Also, due to the Coronavirus situation in society and limitations of time and place, getting virtual contact was done (not necessarily all of them) instead of face-to-face meetings, and they were conducted with tools such as telephone, audio recording, and sending the interview protocol by emails or done in the form of a link for the participants. This matter reduces the level of access to details in the answers and the level of understanding of the answers by the researcher and causes some follow-up questions not to be asked during the interview. This study was conducted only among primary school teachers and principals. Since the views of teachers and principals are necessary at all levels and professional independence will have unique components at each level. Therefore, the generalization of these results to other levels may be made with caution.

According to the mentioned topics, the findings of this research and the model presented in it will be of great use and importance. Also, it has high credibility to be used in the education system of the country, which on the one hand, can be a practical guide for

policymakers at different levels who can make changes based on granting professional independence to teachers and its consequences in line with the progress and development of the society and on the other hand, the level of professional independence of teachers can be investigated using the questionnaire made in this study. Also, studies with different approaches can be carried out by researchers using the constructed model to confirm or reject it. At the end of the words, it can be said that raising this issue in the form of research work can be a point that will increase interest in this issue. Finally, the important things that can be emphasized and pointed out in this model to grant professional independence to teachers as a belief and value accepted by all are that fundamental changes are needed from the advance to the basic levels and reverse, like national macro-politics in the organizational system to the basic levels like internal organizational culture to the social culture.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article is derived from a research work. We hereby thank all the participants in the research and all the loved ones who helped us in this research.

### **Ethical considerations**

During the implementation of this research and the preparation of the article, all national laws and principles of professional ethics related to the subject of research, including the rights of statistical community, organizations and institutions, as well as authors and writers have been observed. Adherence to the principles of research ethics in the present study was observed and consent

forms were consciously completed by all statistical community.

### **Sponsorship**

The present study was funded by the authors of the article.

### **Conflict of interest**

According to the authors of the present article, there was no conflict of interest.

This article has not been previously published in any journal, whether domestic or foreign, and has been sent to the *Journal of School Administration Quarterly* for review and publication only.

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