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Rethinking the development of teacher autonomy: the heteronomy of teaching as a relational perspective on self-determined learning

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Introduction: Teacher education often promotes professional autonomy while assessing teachers' compliance with predefined competencies. However, less attention has been paid to the relational conditions that enable beginning teachers to develop independent professional judgment. This study examines how newly qualified teachers describe the relationships, institutional experiences, and learning practices that shape their professional development. It introduces teacher heteronomy as a conceptual perspective on how interaction with others contributes to the formation of autonomous pedagogical judgment.

Methods: The study employed an exploratory mixed-methods design within the Erasmus+ DigitalTA project (2023–2024). Data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by 327 teachers from Spain and 15 countries or territories in the Americas, and a focus group involving six early-career teachers in Spain. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses and focus-group discussions underwent inductive categorisation and thematic analysis. Findings from both sources were compared.

Results: Participants identified integration into teaching teams as their main expectation of school leadership (68.2%). Communication difficulties with colleagues (44.3%) and lack of confidence (44.0%) were common challenges. University studies (43.7%) and postgraduate education (41.3%) were frequently reported learning sources, while 30.9% highlighted learning in the workplace as a key source of professional development and self-evaluation was the most selected reflective strategy (72.8%). Pedagogical and socio-emotional competences were prominent priorities. Participants also called for more school-based practice, updated curricula, mentoring, and stronger professional support.

Discussion: The findings support a relational understanding of professional learning, highlighting the importance of colleagues, mentors, institutional experiences, and reflective practices in beginning teachers' development. The article proposes teacher heteronomy as a conceptual framework in which engagement with others contributes to autonomous professional judgment, rather than implying dependence or obedience. In dialogue with heutagogy, this perspective suggests strengthening initial teacher education through supervised placements, mentoring, collaborative inquiry, and opportunities for self-determined learning. Longitudinal research is needed to assess these relationships empirically.

KEYWORDS

heutagogy, initial teacher education, professional learning communities, relational learning, teacher autonomy, teacher heteronomy

1 Introduction

Recent debates on heutagogy have highlighted self-determined learning as a cornerstone of teacher education. However, little attention has been paid to the relational conditions that make self-determination possible during the transition from pre-service to professional practice. Heutagogy conceptualises self-determined learning through learners' choices about their learning needs, processes, and evaluation, supported by reflection and the development of capability (Hase and Kenyon, 2000; Blaschke, 2012; Glassner and Back, 2020). In teacher education, this raises a question about the conditions under which beginning teachers can exercise pedagogical judgment rather than merely complete prescribed tasks. Recent studies connect heutagogy to teachers' agency and dialogical inquiry and examine its applications in diverse higher-education settings (Soffer-Vital et al., 2025; Levanon and Gusacov, 2026).

Across Ibero-American settings, teacher education takes place within distinct national institutions, curricula, and working conditions. Some policy and curriculum analyses identify tensions between commitments to professional autonomy and assessment through standardized outcomes (Ramírez Martínez et al., 2025; Barrios Estrada, 2025). These analyses provide a context for the present inquiry; they do not establish that all programs in the region operate in the same way.

Relational accounts of teacher agency, situated learning, and participation in professional communities already recognize the social conditions of professional development (Graven et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Priestley et al., 2015).

The proposition advanced here is more specific: relationships with colleagues, mentors, learners, and institutions participate in forming the professional subject who becomes capable of autonomous judgment. We call this process teacher heteronomy, while retaining teachers' capacity to question received practices and make accountable pedagogical decisions.

In this article, teacher heteronomy names the relational formation of autonomous professional judgment during the transition into teaching. It does not mean subjection to another person's will, the conventional philosophical meaning of heteronomy. Institutional routines can also constrain agency; their contribution depends on opportunities to examine, contest, and revise them with others. This distinction guides our reading of beginning teachers' reported experiences and our dialogue with self-determined learning.

This formulation connects relational autonomy, teacher agency, situated participation, and collaborative professional learning without equating them. Agency concerns what teachers can do within particular conditions; participation describes learning with others. Teacher heteronomy focuses on the formation of the teacher who can interpret evidence and take responsibility for decisions (Graven et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Priestley et al., 2015).

The research question is: How do beginning teachers describe the relationships, institutional experiences, and learning practices that they consider relevant to the development of professional judgment? We then consider what these accounts may imply for heutagogical approaches to initial teacher education.

We address this question through descriptive survey responses from 327 participants in Spain and 15 American countries and an additional focus group with six early-career teachers in Spain. These sources offer complementary views of perceived needs and professional learning; they cannot establish a causal account of how autonomy develops.

1.1 The paradox of teacher autonomy: policy discourses and competency-based teacher education

Teacher education across Spain and the participating American countries is shaped by different policies, programme structures, and school contexts. Regional comparisons therefore require caution. Curriculum analyses (Ramírez Martínez et al., 2025) and studies of market-oriented reforms (Miñana Blasco, 2010; Horcas López et al., 2024; Bernatené, 2023; Sandoval Flores, 2025; Barrios Estrada, 2025) identify recurring tensions that warrant examination in relation to teachers' everyday experiences.

In this regard, at the macro level—among international bodies such as the OECD (2025) or UNESCO (Al Abri and Pasqualini, 2024)—teacher training is identified as a transformative element for societies. This perspective envisions a teacher who plays a reflective, critical, and transformative role, acting in relation to the culture of their teaching context.

A dominant conception of the teacher as an autonomous professional is emerging on the international stage. As noted by Delgado and Fernández (2025) regarding Brazil and Bolivia—public policies on teacher training explicitly target the necessity

of professional teacher autonomy. This prevailing view of teacher autonomy affects all levels of the education system: from faculties of education (encompassing faculty autonomy and academic freedom for professors, as seen in Spain or Colombia) and primary and secondary schools (such as the autonomy granted to educational institutions in Mexico) to the autonomy of the individual teacher, a concept demonstrated by Murillo Torrecilla (2011) in the cases of Chile, Peru, and Spain.

Teacher training is a shifting object of study that needs to be contextualized through its relationship with the State's educational task, which is constituted as one of the functions of social control (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970, p. 2022).

> Initial teacher training is a subject of study undergoing continuous transformation, as it evolves in step with the social, demographic, political, and economic changes in our countries; while these changes initially impact the conditions of early childhood education and schooling, they quickly translate into new demands regarding teaching practice—and, consequently, new practices in initial teacher training.
>
> (Ramírez et al, pp 361–362, 2025).

The ideal of teacher autonomy as a professional goal operates alongside the design of national competency-based teacher training curricula, responding to three main trends:

1. A historically situated pedagogical "trend": as demonstrated by Ramírez Martínez et al. (2025), training curricula are designed in relation to a pedagogical approach supported by international institutions (behaviorism, constructivism, or the competency-based model).
2. International political and economic influences: the intervention of international quality assurance agencies, alongside the fact that educational reforms also respond to economic demands.
3. A focus on teacher training as the shaping or creation of a specific form—resulting in a "teacher" (Sandoval Flores, 2025): the aim is to create homogeneous (and autonomous) professionals rather than fostering the emergence of a professional defined by identity and experience (and an autonomy linked to a community of knowledge and practice).

An analysis of the conception of the curriculum in Ibero-American teacher training reveals the imposition of a training curriculum characterized by a technical and controlling approach. Regarding the teacher, the aim is to "reduce their work to the fulfillment of objectives and competencies, as part of certain assumptions regarding quality and development" (Barrios Estrada, 2025, p. 323).

Ramírez Martínez et al. (2025) describe tensions between pedagogical judgment and curricula organised around predefined standards. Barrios (2015, 202 5) traces the historical roots of technical approaches to teacher preparation. The concern here is with the reduction of professional learning to compliance with narrow, individually assessed outcomes, rather than with teachers developing useful professional capabilities:

> The competency-based curricular proposal ultimately represents a return to the "curriculum-proof" teacher envisioned by the Taylorized educational technology of the 1970s—a model in which pedagogy is rendered invisible, reduced to a technical, supplementary function of the educational process; thus, the displacement of pedagogy from both teacher training programs and actual teaching practices persists.
>
> (2025, p.156)

FA narrow interpretation of competency-based preparation can emphasise procedures and measurable outcomes at the expense of situated pedagogical judgment (Barrios, 2015, 2025). This critique does not reject professional competencies: it asks how practical, interpersonal, and reflective capabilities are learned and supported within schools. The following section therefore considers institutional experience as a setting for professional learning.

> Viewing teachers-in-training merely as individuals required to comply with educational reforms—acting out of a sense of obligation to "become trained," without any accompanying reflection—treats them as wards of the state or as minors. Initial teacher training conceived in this way stands in opposition to processes that foster autonomy, emancipation, and even resistance against domination by others. The goal is to cultivate teacher autonomy rather than to view the teacher as a minor requiring state guardianship
>
> (Rivera Morales, 2025, p. 288).

There is, then, a contradiction between the discourse—and the notion of autonomy for teachers, educational institutions, and teacher training schools—and actual practices, such as the imposition of pedagogical trends through the design of competency-based curricula, which results in a lack of teacher autonomy. This contradiction during teacher training reveals a lack of autonomy in practice and directly fosters confusion regarding the teaching role during the training phase, ultimately leading to a lack of preparation and training for carrying out daily teaching duties.

1.2 Teacher education as institutional experience

As Rabal and González observe in the case of Spain (2025), there is a clear discrepancy between the competencies prioritized in teacher evaluation processes—which are predominantly technical-pedagogical in nature—and the competencies recognized in international literature as fundamental for meeting current teaching demands, particularly socio-emotional competencies and those linked to the inclusive management of diversity.

As a pedagogical reference point, heutagogical approaches use learner-defined questions, negotiated resources, reflection, and assessment of capability (Blaschke, 2012; Glassner and Back, 2020). In initial teacher education, supervised placements and peer inquiry could provide opportunities to make such choices in relation to real school problems. The present needs assessment does not compare

programmes or evaluate these approaches; it identifies participant-reported priorities that may inform their design.

Following Ferry (1990, 1997) concept of training—as cited by Rivera Morales (2025)—no one actively trains to a strictly passive other:

> Training must not be reduced to an action exerted by a trainer upon a malleable 'trainee' who passively receives the shape impressed upon them by the trainer. The foolish project of molding the other—of creating a being in one's own image, of breathing life into them (the fantasy of the facilitator)—can only inflict death.
>
> (Ferry, 1990, p. 53).

The concept of teaching autonomously—within the framework of a training program focused on acquiring theoretical knowledge defined by competencies—points toward the creation of a standardized type of teacher; this stands in tension with the future reality of the profession, where teaching is fundamentally a practice—a way of being, living, and inhabiting the school environment as a teacher. In other words, learning to teach also involves an "institutional experience" and engagement with others in the community, as noted by Rockwell and Mercado (1988). Authors initiate a reflection on the different dimensions that support teaching practice, with the purpose of including them in the learning process of teaching. They finally ask: "How can school reality be recovered within teacher training and updating projects?" (Rockwell and Mercado, 1988, p.65).

Rockwell and Mercado (1988) argue that understanding teaching requires moving beyond the formal structures that define schools, such as regulations, policies or legal frameworks. Although these dimensions shape institutional life, they do not fully explain how teaching is learned and enacted in practice. For this reason, analysing the everyday life of schools becomes essential. As the authors state, "to understand the teaching practice, it is unavoidable to look at the school" (p. 66). Daily interactions, routines, informal norms and shared practices are not secondary aspects of schooling but fundamental components of the institution itself, as they continuously shape professional activity alongside official regulations. From this perspective, teaching practice cannot be understood solely through disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge. Teachers also develop professionally through their accumulated experience, their participation in institutional life and their engagement with the cultural dynamics of schools. Rockwell and Mercado (1988) emphasise that these institutional experiences are rarely recognised as central to teacher education, despite their decisive influence on professional development. Schools function as historical and social environments in which teachers progressively construct their professional identities, practical knowledge and ways of acting. Consequently, initial teacher education should acknowledge the school not only as a site for applying previously acquired knowledge but also as a primary context for professional learning. As the authors conclude, "teachers are trained in the schools in which they work" (1988, p. 70).

This leads us to think that a good part of their "professional way of doing things" is acquired from the dynamics (visible and invisible) that take place in the educational centres: habits, customs, and traditions; ways of being and doing in the classrooms, which are learned from the exchange with other professionals. Rockwell and Mercado identify these dimensions of everyday experience:

Figure 1 presents six dimensions of everyday institutional experience derived from Rockwell and Mercado (1988). It provides a conceptual map of the school contexts in which teachers encounter routines, relationships, and opportunities for practice; the figure is not an empirically derived model from the present survey.

Professional identity is shaped through interactions with colleagues, pupils, institutional routines, and teachers' own reflection (Rockwell and Mercado, 1988; Pérez Gracia et al., 2022). These encounters can expand teachers' interpretive resources, while unsupportive norms can restrict the range of available choices. The distinction matters when assessing the contribution of communities to professional agency.

In this instance, considering institutional experience as a key factor in teacher training, one might question the actual effectiveness of current teacher training—which is characterized by a lack of emphasis on pedagogy and professionalization (Sandoval Flores, 2025): "the link between teacher training and pedagogy is called into question in the face of a teaching professionalism undermined by policies that, in practice, de-professionalize the teaching role and reduce the teacher to a mere replicator of policies" (p. 18).

Learning to teach involves collaborative and situated inquiry into everyday practice. Digital professional communities can extend such exchanges beyond a particular school, including through the DigitalTA initiative. Their contribution to self-determination, however, depends on the quality of participation and the possibility of critical disagreement, not simply on access to a platform (Blaschke, 2012).

The institutional dimensions in Figure 1 and the possibilities for peer exchange provide a rationale for examining how participants describe support and learning. The present study did not test whether participation in DigitalTA improved well-being, identity, or autonomy.

1.3 Digital communities for newly qualified teachers: DigitalTA platform

DigitalTA (2021–2024) was a European initiative intended to support the transition from pre-service to in-service teaching through shared resources and professional exchange. Its design provides the project context for the needs assessment reported here; platform use or effectiveness was not measured in this study. The Erasmus + consortium included teacher education and professional development providers from the Czech Republic, Ireland, Poland, Spain, and Belgium (project ID 101055620). It developed a digital environment intended to connect teachers, mentors, and educators and to share practice-based resources across institutional and national settings.

The platform was designed to host cases and resources concerning everyday teaching challenges and to support peer discussion, problem-solving, and collaborative resource development. These affordances are compatible with heutagogical approaches that provide learners with choices and

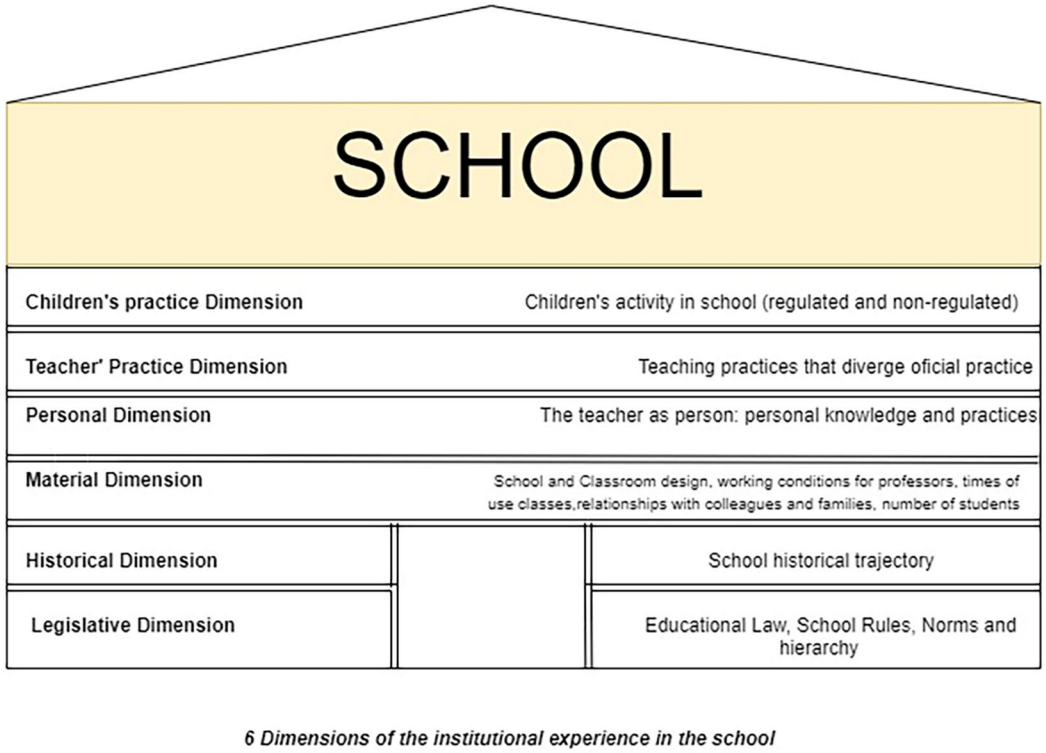


FIGURE 1
6 dimensions of the institutional experience at school. Based on Rockwell and Mercado (1988). This figure was designed manually thanks to Draw IO Program (Google).

occasions for reflection (Glassner and Back, 2020); whether participants experienced them in this way requires separate evidence. The intended learning community connects classroom experience with peer exchange and a repository of teaching resources. Such exchanges may support professional inquiry when teachers can compare interpretations, evaluate evidence, and adapt ideas to their own contexts. Access to a digital environment alone does not demonstrate sustained participation or changes in professional autonomy. The present analysis concerns the questionnaire and focus-group data collected as part of the project, not an evaluation of platform users.

2 Materials and methods

We conducted an exploratory mixed-methods needs assessment within the Erasmus + DigitalTA project in 2023–2024. The online questionnaire supplies descriptive information on reported needs and learning practices; a single focus group provides contextual accounts of the transition into teaching. We bring the two strands together in the discussion by comparing patterns across the survey categories and discussion themes. Neither strand directly measures autonomy or tests a programme intervention. The inquiry was guided by the research question stated in the Introduction: How do beginning teachers describe relationships, institutional experiences, and learning practices relevant to professional judgment?

Teacher heteronomy served as a sensitising theoretical proposition during interpretation, rather than as an *a priori* causal hypothesis to be confirmed by the data.

The study involved 333 participants in total: 327 completed the questionnaire, and six additional early-career teachers took part in the focus group. The survey included respondents from Spain and 15 countries or territories in the Americas: Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, Panama, Chile, Peru, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala. These settings are heterogeneous; the sample does not support country-level comparisons or statistical generalisation across Ibero-America.

Two sources of evidence were collected in 2023–2024: an online needs-assessment questionnaire and one focus-group discussion in Segovia, Spain. The survey and focus group addressed overlapping themes of professional support, school experience, and learning.

2.1 Needs analysis questionnaire for newly qualified teachers in Spain and South America

The research team developed a questionnaire for the project needs assessment. Researchers at Jan Kochanowski University and the European University of the Atlantic reviewed the instrument, leading to 19 changes in format and three in content. Following these revisions, the instrument's

psychometric properties were examined using the latest version of SPSS. Internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .901$), while content validity was evaluated using the Content Validity RaMo index (CVR = .66). Inter-rater agreement was also examined through Fleiss' Kappa, which indicated a moderate level of agreement.

The questionnaire is used here to describe perceived training needs and professional experiences. Its psychometric results should be interpreted in light of the instrument's development and the validation details reported above.

The online questionnaire yielded 327 responses. It collected background characteristics and covered seven areas: (1) professional needs, (2) relationships in a new school context, (3) sources of professional learning, (4) teaching capabilities, (5) university teacher education, (6) personal development, and (7) professional development. We report Areas 1–4 because they address the needs, relationships, learning sources, and capabilities discussed in this article. These self-reports are indirect indicators of perceived conditions for professional learning, not an operational measure of autonomy. Related to the timing and rationale of this selection, items on expectations of school leaders and learning sources illuminate respondents' perceptions of institutional support; the reflective-practice item asks which approaches they select, including self-evaluation and dialogue.

2.2 Focus group interviews on the experiences of beginner and newly qualified teachers in Spain within the erasmus + digital TA project

A one-hour focus group took place in Segovia, Spain, on 20 February 2024, coordinated by project partner CFIE Segovia. Six early-career teachers participated. This group supplements the survey with situated accounts from one Spanish setting; it is not representative of the 327 survey respondents.

Participants taught in early childhood, primary, or secondary education and reported fewer than five years of experience. A CFIE pedagogical adviser moderated an open-ended discussion about early-career challenges, available support, and valued resources. Researchers built a non-probability purposive sample. Participants were recruited following determined characteristics in order to have a representative sample: they worked on different teaching contexts (urban and rural schools), in different levels of education (for early childhood education to secondary education), they taught different subjects, in different types of schools (public or private). Participants provided consent for the focus-group discussion to be audio-recorded and transcribed for research purposes. All data were handled confidentially and were anonymized and translated to English by research team.

Survey responses were summarized using descriptive percentages; answers to open-ended items were grouped into categories. The focus-group discussion was interpreted through inductive thematic coding informed by Chandra and Shang (2019). At the interpretation stage, we compared patterns concerning relationships, practical learning, and reflection across the two sources and noted differences between the geographically broader survey and the Segovia group. This complementarity supports an exploratory reading of perceptions; it does not constitute independent confirmation that autonomy increased.

3 Results

3.1 Questionnaire results

The questionnaire was completed by 327 respondents from Spain and 15 countries or territories in the Americas. The largest groups were from Brazil (28.7%), Ecuador (18.3%), Honduras (11.6%), the Dominican Republic (10.4%), and Colombia (6.4%); the remaining respondents came from the other participating settings. Respondents reported working in secondary education (33.3%), early childhood or primary education (28.4%), vocational education and training (12.2%), and other settings (26.0%). Uneven national representation limits cross-country interpretation.

Respondents reported working predominantly in urban settings (74.6%), with 25.4% in rural settings. Areas 1–4 are presented below because they address perceived support, relationships, learning sources, and professional capabilities. Regarding Area 2, we focused on NQT expectations and challenges during their first year of teaching.

On one hand, when research team asked about newly qualified teacher expectations of school leaders during their first years of teaching, the most frequently selected response was integration into the teaching team (68.2%), highlighting the importance of feeling included within the professional community. Approximately four in ten respondents expected an introduction to the teaching role and school procedures (38.8%), as well as understanding and empathy from school leaders (38.8%). Similarly, 37.9% valued kindness and a supportive attitude from the leadership team. Only 16.2% selected other expectations. Since participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not sum to 100%, as we can see in Table 1.

Integration into the teaching team was the most frequently selected expectation (68.2%; Table 1). Participants could choose up to three responses, so this finding describes relative selection frequency rather than a ranking of individual priorities or a measure of autonomy.

On another hand, participants identified communication and interpersonal relationships as some of the main challenges encountered during their first years of teaching (Table 2). The most frequently reported difficulties were distance in

TABLE 1 Expectation from leaders.

Expectation from the school principal/ leadership team	*n*	%*
Integration into the teaching team	223	**68.2%**
Introduction to the teaching role and school procedures	127	**38.8%**
Understanding and empathy	127	**38.8%**
Kindness and supportive attitude	124	**37.9%**
Other expectations	53	**16.2%**

Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to three options.

communication with colleagues (44.3%), lack of confidence (44.0%), and confusing or chaotic information transfer within the school (44.0%). Difficulties in communicating with the school leadership team (40.7%) and an unfriendly working environment among colleagues (38.5%) were also commonly reported. Around one-third of respondents identified anxiety (33.0%) and perceived unfair or preferential treatment of teachers (30.0%) as significant challenges. Reports of bullying (7.3%) or other communication-related difficulties (7.3%) were comparatively uncommon.

In area 3 we focused on asking about source of knowledge and how NQT are building their pedagogical knowledge. When we asked to identify the three most significant sources of professional learning, respondents placed greatest value on university studies (43.7%) and postgraduate education (41.3%), followed by face-to-face workshops and training activities (35.8%). Digital learning opportunities also played an important role, with 32.1% of participants selecting webinars and online training, while 30.9% highlighted learning in the workplace as a key source of professional development. Reflective and experience-based learning were also considered relevant, including self-reflection (27.5%) and experiential learning (26.0%). Around one in five respondents identified international cooperation (20.5%) and professional learning communities (20.2%) as important contributors to their professional growth. Other sources, such as mentoring (14.1%), observation of colleagues (13.8%), self-directed learning (13.5%), research literature (11.9%), study visits (6.4%), and other resources (1.5%), were selected less frequently.

Formal study was frequently selected, alongside workplace learning (30.9%), international cooperation (20.5%), and professional communities (20.2%). These percentages describe reported learning sources and should not be interpreted as evidence that one source produced greater autonomy than another.

Regarding their reflective practice, participants reported using a wide range of strategies to develop their startegies, as we can see in Table 3:

Self-evaluation was by far the most frequently selected approach (72.8%), indicating that individual reflection remains the predominant mechanism for evaluating teaching practice. Almost half of the respondents also identified dialogue with colleagues (48.9%) and feedback from students (45.0%) as important sources of reflection. Other commonly reported strategies included classroom observation (33.0%), taking notes on one's own teaching (30.0%), and peer learning (26.9%). Less frequently selected approaches were engagement with professional literature (22.6%), the use of professional portfolios (20.8%), participation in professional organisations (14.4%), mentoring (12.8%), video recording of lessons (8.6%), and the design of surveys or questionnaires (8.3%). Only 1.8% of respondents reported using other reflective practices. There is, then, a duality in the development of reflective practice. On the one hand, self-assessment (72.8%) remains the predominant strategy, reflecting a traditional conception of reflection as an individual process. However, the next most highly valued strategies are clearly relational: dialogue with colleagues (48.9%), student feedback (45.0%), classroom observation (33.0%), and peer learning (26.9%).

Taken together, these results suggest that, although individual reflection continues to play a central role, novice teachers increasingly recognize the value of interacting with other educational stakeholders to construct professional knowledge.

In Area 4 we focused on asking partiicpants about their opinion regarding the type of basic competencies for teachers development. This was an open-question, consequently the response was captegorized by research team, as we can see in Table 4.

The inductive analysis of participants' responses identified six broad categories of professional competences. The largest category corresponded to pedagogical and didactic competences (approximately 31%), including lesson planning, assessment, classroom management, curriculum implementation and teaching methodologies. This finding confirms that newly qualified teachers continue to view mastery of teaching and learning processes as the foundation of professional practice.

The second most frequently identified category comprised socio-emotional and interpersonal competences (approximately

TABLE 2 Newly qualified teachers communication challenges.

Communication challenges faced by newly qualified teachers	*n*	%*
Distance in communication with colleagues	145	**44.3%**
Lack of confidence	144	**44.0%**
Confusing and chaotic information transfer	144	**44.0%**
Distance in communication with the school leadership team	133	**40.7%**
Unfriendly working environment among colleagues	126	**38.5%**
Anxiety	108	**33.0%**
Unfair or preferential treatment of teachers	98	**30.0%**
Bullying	24	**7.3%**
Other	24	**7.3%**

Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to three options.

TABLE 3 Relective practice strategies.

Reflective practice strategies	*n*	%*
Self-evaluation	238	**72.8%**
Dialogue with colleagues	160	**48.9%**
Feedback from students	147	**45.0%**
Classroom observation	108	**33.0%**
Taking notes on one's own teaching	98	**30.0%**
Peer learning	88	**26.9%**
Engagement with professional literature	74	**22.6%**
Professional portfolio	68	**20.8%**
Engagement with professional organisations/associations	47	**14.4%**
Mentoring	42	**12.8%**
Video recording of lessons	28	**8.6%**
Designing surveys/questionnaires	27	**8.3%**
Other	6	**1.8%**

Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to three options.

TABLE 4 Six categories of professional competences identify by participants.

Category	Description	Competences included	Estimated frequency*
Pedagogical and didactic competences	Mastery of teaching and learning processes and the ability to manage classroom instruction effectively.	Teaching methodologies, lesson planning, assessment, classroom management, curriculum implementation, instructional strategies.	≈31%
Socio-emotional and interpersonal competences	Skills for building positive relationships and managing one's own emotions as well as those of students.	Empathy, emotional intelligence, communication, patience, active listening, respect, resilience, collaborative work.	≈27%
Disciplinary knowledge and professional development	Strong subject-matter knowledge and commitment to continuous professional learning.	Subject knowledge, continuing professional development, educational research, professional updating, self-directed learning.	≈19%
Digital competences	Pedagogical use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning processes.	ICT, artificial intelligence (AI), digital resources, digital competence, digital innovation.	≈10%
Ethical commitment and professional identity	Values and attitudes that underpin the teaching profession.	Professional commitment, ethics, responsibility, vocation, leadership, professionalism.	≈8%
Innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving	Capacity to adapt to change and promote educational improvement.	Creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, flexibility, research.	≈5%

The frequencies are approximate because each response could be coded into more than one category. Prepared by the authors based on a content analysis of the open-ended responses.

27%), encompassing empathy, emotional intelligence, communication skills, active listening, collaboration, resilience and the ability to establish positive relationships with students and colleagues. The prominence of this category suggests that participants attribute considerable importance to the relational dimension of teaching, recognising that effective professional practice depends not only on technical expertise but also on the capacity to build supportive educational relationships.

A third group of responses referred to disciplinary knowledge and continuous professional development (approximately 19%), highlighting the importance of maintaining up-to-date subject knowledge and engaging in lifelong learning. Competences related to the pedagogical use of digital technologies represented approximately 10% of the responses, while ethical commitment and professional identity (8%) and innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving (5%) appeared less frequently.

Overall, the findings reveal that participants value a balanced combination of pedagogical expertise, disciplinary knowledge and interpersonal competences. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial weight assigned to socio-emotional and collaborative skills, which together represent more than one quarter of all responses.

The responses show that novice teachers understand that good teaching performance arises from the integration of three major dimensions: knowledge (disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge); skills (teaching methods, planning, assessment, and classroom management); and interpersonal skills (empathy, communication, leadership, ethics, and emotional intelligence). Finally, we asked participants about their opinion regarding future improvements in initial teacher training. This was also an open-ended question, categorized by the research team. Content analysis allowed us to identify eight main categories that summarize the proposals formulated by the participants to strengthen initial teacher training. (Table 5):

The improvement proposals foregrounded practice-based preparation and stronger connections between universities and schools.

The most frequently coded suggestion concerned more extensive school-based practice (approximately 34%). Other themes were curriculum renewal (approximately 21%), digital capabilities and innovation (approximately 14%), socio-emotional preparation and inclusive education (approximately 12%), continuing learning (approximately 9%), connections between universities and schools (approximately 8%), professional identity and ethical commitment (approximately 7%), and research and reflection (approximately 6%; Table 5). Responses could receive more than one code, so these percentages should not be added. Respondents' suggestions concerned application and contextualisation as well as content.

Taken together, the open-ended responses indicate interest in authentic school experience, dialogue with colleagues, and the application of pedagogical knowledge in context. They do not show that participants reject disciplinary knowledge or that the study has measured the formation of autonomy.

The proposals favour a more integrated account of professional capability that combines knowledge, practice, and interpersonal judgment.

3.2 Focus group findings

The focus group findings revealed that the transition from initial teacher education to professional practice is experienced as a complex and emotionally demanding process. Participants described their first years of teaching as a period characterised by enthusiasm and professional fulfilment, but also by uncertainty, stress and a persistent feeling of being insufficiently prepared for the realities of school life. One of the most consistent themes concerned the importance of professional

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TABLE 5 Improvements in teacher training.

Category	Description	Illustrative responses	Approximate frequency (%)
Strengthening practical training and school placements	Participants called for more school-based experiences, earlier teaching practice, pedagogical residencies, mentoring, and greater exposure to authentic classroom situations.	"More practice than theory"; "Intensive teaching practice"; "Pedagogical residency"; "Teaching in classrooms throughout the programme"; "Real classroom cases."	≈34
Curriculum renewal and relevance of teacher education	Reform teacher education curricula to address contemporary educational challenges by incorporating innovative pedagogies, social change, and the actual needs of schools.	"Update the curriculum"; "Adapt study programmes"; "Respond to current educational needs"; "A curriculum for the twenty-first century."	≈21
Digital competences and educational innovation	Integrate digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), ICT, and innovative teaching approaches into teacher education programmes.	"Digital education"; "Artificial intelligence"; "Emerging technologies"; "Digital tools."	≈14
Socio-emotional competences and inclusive education	Strengthen preparation in emotional regulation, diversity, inclusion, resilience, conflict resolution, and other soft skills.	"Emotional management"; "Socio-emotional education"; "Inclusion"; "Diversity"; "Conflict resolution."	≈12
Continuous professional learning and development	Promote lifelong learning through continuing professional development, postgraduate education, and ongoing professional support.	"Continuous training"; "Professional development"; "Lifelong learning."	≈9
Stronger links with educational practice and context	Better prepare future teachers for authentic school settings by connecting university learning with students' needs and educational contexts.	"Teaching based on real contexts"; "Understanding the needs of the school community"; "Preparation for real-life situations."	≈8
Professional values, vocation, and teacher identity	Foster ethical commitment, responsibility, vocation, and a humanistic conception of teaching.	"Teaching vocation"; "Human values"; "Commitment"; "Humanism."	≈7
Research and reflective practice	Promote educational research, critical reflection, and systematic analysis of teaching practice.	"Love of research"; "Continuous reflection"; "Research competences."	≈6

Categories were generated through inductive coding of responses to the open-ended question. Percentages are approximate because individual responses could be coded into more than one category.

relationships. Participants emphasised that supportive colleagues, mentors and school leaders played a decisive role in facilitating their adaptation to the profession. Informal advice, collaborative problem-solving and the willingness of experienced teachers to share resources were perceived as more valuable than formal induction activities: "a support is always possible simply asking colleagues" (participant 6). "They encourage me" (participant 1) told us participant 1, about her colleagues.

Likewise, positive relationships with students were identified as one of the main sources of motivation and professional satisfaction (participant 4 said "the students also give you a lot of positive moments"), reinforcing participants' commitment to teaching despite the difficulties encountered.

However, these experiences varied considerably depending on the school context. While some participants described welcoming environments that encouraged collaboration and professional growth, others reported feelings of isolation, excessive workload and limited institutional support.

The absence of structured induction programmes and continuous mentoring emerged as one of the main shortcomings of the transition from pre-service to in-service teaching. Participants consistently argued that closer professional accompaniment during the first years of practice would have eased their adaptation and strengthened their confidence as beginning teachers. In this sense, Participant 4 told us about a conflict with a family: "the management team supported me, but I felt a lot of insecurity in what I had done in my daily practice in class."

Participant 2 focused on the lack of support during her transition period, specially from the counsellor: "she was quite overwhelmed and I think I would have liked to have had more support from the management team".

The discussions also highlighted the gap between university preparation and the everyday demands of teaching. Although participants generally considered that their initial teacher education had provided an adequate theoretical foundation, they perceived important limitations in relation to practical classroom management, communication with families, curriculum implementation, assessment practices and emotional coping strategies. Consequently, many reported low levels of self-confidence during their first years of professional practice.

Faced with these challenges, participants described adopting a proactive approach to their professional learning. They sought additional resources, attended professional development activities, reflected on their own teaching and, above all, relied on professional networks and collaborative communities to exchange experiences and obtain practical advice. These relational learning processes were perceived as essential for

developing teaching competence and responding to the complex situations encountered in schools.

Overall, the focus group findings suggest that newly qualified teachers do not construct professional autonomy in isolation, but in contact (in relation) with peers and experienced teachers:

> I propose a co-tutorship. The teachers, the internship tutors are the mentors with the internship students they have, I think it is a very positive thing that there is a co-tutorship because it is a way in which you can learn from your partner, observation of your classmates seems essential to me (Participant 4)

Rather, their learning is shaped through continuous interaction with colleagues, mentors and the wider educational community. Consequently, initial teacher education could be strengthened by fostering collaborative communities, peer support and reflective professional networks.

4 Discussion: from teacher autonomy to teacher heteronomy

In the Kantian tradition, autonomy concerns self-governance, whereas heteronomy refers to determination by an external will. The term "teacher heteronomy" therefore needs a precise, qualified use: it names the formative role of others in the development of professional judgment, not obedience to external authority. The tension between institutional support and imposed control remains central to our argument (Kant, 1989; Castoriadis, 1975).

Castoriadis (1975) situates autonomy within historically formed social relations and the capacity to question instituted meanings. For beginning teachers, this suggests that encounters with established school practices can become sources of judgment when teachers can examine those practices, negotiate them with others, and revise their own decisions. Figure 2 represents this proposed relation; it should not be read as an empirically tested developmental sequence.

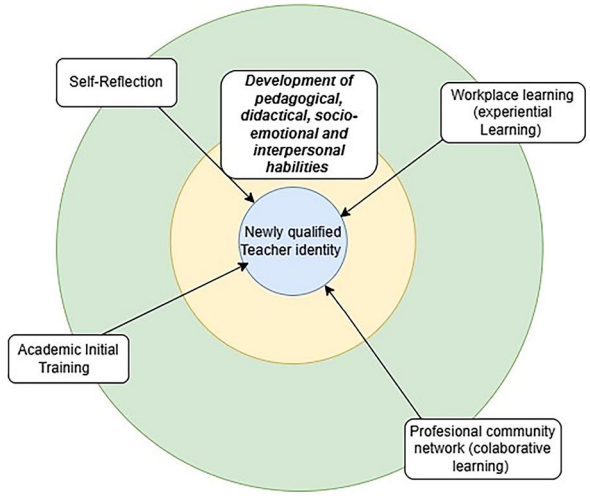


FIGURE 2
The development of the heteronomy of teaching. This figure was designed manually thanks to Draw IO Program (Google).

The questionnaire and focus group identify reported needs for school integration, professional exchange, and reflective practice. These findings are compatible with the proposed relational account, but a cross-sectional study of self-reports cannot establish when or how autonomous judgment was formed.

Participants identified pedagogical and didactic capabilities most often in the open-ended item, followed by socio-emotional and interpersonal capabilities. Because the categories were generated from participants' responses, they show the breadth of valued expertise without demonstrating that one capability causes another or that collaborative learning alone develops autonomy.

Integration into school teams was a frequently selected expectation. Rockwell and Mercado's (1988) account of institutional experience helps interpret why school routines and relationships may matter. This interpretation extends earlier work on situated participation (Graven et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991), while the present data concern beginning teachers' perceptions.

Respondents also reported difficulties in communication and access to support. Such experiences complicate an exclusively positive view of professional communities: relationships can provide resources for judgment, but hierarchies, weak induction, or exclusion can restrict it.

Respondents selected both individual self-evaluation and relational reflective practices (Table 3); they also named formal study and workplace learning as sources (Table 6). The Segovia discussion adds examples of mentorship needs and the uneven availability of support. Read together, these sources point toward conditions worth examining in self-determined teacher learning rather than documenting a measured increase in agency.

TABLE 6 Source of profesional learning.

Sources of professional learning	*n*	%*
University studies	143	**43.7%**
Postgraduate courses	135	**41.3%**
Face-to-face workshops and training	117	**35.8%**
Webinars and online training	105	**32.1%**
Workplace learning	101	**30.9%**
Self-reflection	90	**27.5%**
Experiential learning	85	**26.0%**
International cooperation	67	**20.5%**
Professional learning communities	66	**20.2%**
Internet resources	48	**14.7%**
Mentoring	46	**14.1%**
Observation of colleagues	45	**13.8%**
Self-directed learning	44	**13.5%**
Research literature	39	**11.9%**
Study visits	21	**6.4%**
Other	5	**1.5%**

Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to three options.

The contribution of "teacher heteronomy" is therefore conceptual. Existing accounts describe teacher agency and communities of practice (Graven et al., 1998; Priestley et al., 2015); our term foregrounds how participation may help constitute a teacher capable of making and defending situated pedagogical judgments. Whether this mechanism operates as proposed remains a question for longitudinal research.

Heutagogy foregrounds learner choice, reflection, and capability, but it need not imply isolated learning (Hase and Kenyon, 2000; Blaschke, 2012; Glassner and Back, 2020). Recent work discusses teachers' freedom and dialogical agency (Levanon and Gusacov, 2026), while Soffer-Vital et al. (2025) examine heutagogical learning in a different higher-education context. For beginning teachers, this suggests offering choices over problems of practice, guided inquiry with mentors and peers, and opportunities to justify and reconsider pedagogical decisions.

The critique of competency-based curricula targets a reductive use of predetermined, individually assessed checklists (Barrios Estrada, 2025). It does not conflict with participants' recognition that pedagogical, interpersonal, and reflective capabilities are valuable; the question is how programmes make room for their situated development.

Figure 2 summarises the proposed interplay of institutional experience, dialogue and reflective judgment. It is a conceptual synthesis informed by the literature and interpreted alongside the data, not a path whose stages have been validated in this study.

No one trains another except through others (Ferry, 1990). Teacher heteronomy, as used here, calls for opportunities to test pedagogical ideas through school placements, structured mentorship, peer inquiry, and reflection on contrasting interpretations. These practices may support heutagogical choice when prospective teachers can define a problem, consult others, exercise judgment, and review its consequences (Glassner and Back, 2020; Rivera Morales, 2025).

The possible effects of such arrangements on well-being, identity, retention, or long-term autonomy remain to be assessed empirically.

5 Conclusion

This study began with a tension between curricular accounts of autonomous professionalism and beginning teachers' reported need for guidance and participation in school life. Its answer is conceptual and provisional: professional autonomy may develop through relationships that make judgment possible while leaving teachers room to question established practices. The descriptive survey and the Segovia focus group show that participants value practical experience, team integration, self-evaluation, and professional exchange. These perceptions inform, but do not validate, the proposed account of teacher heteronomy.

For initial teacher education, a practical implication is to connect supervised placements with shared inquiry, choice of problems of practice, peer feedback, and explicit reflection on decisions. Heutagogical learning requires opportunities for self-determination within supportive relationships; the study did not evaluate whether the DigitalTA platform provided these opportunities in practice. The 16 participating national or territorial contexts should not be treated as a uniform teacher education system. Programme-level studies are needed to compare how curricula, mentorship, assessment, and school placements create or restrict choices for beginning teachers.

Teacher heteronomy identifies a proposed process through which engagement with others contributes to the formation of teachers who can make and justify their own professional judgments. It differs from institutional dependence because critical dialogue and the possibility of dissent are essential to its account of autonomy. The questionnaire captured the relative frequency of selected expectations and reflective strategies; the focus group provided localised accounts of support and uncertainty. Neither source observed teaching practice or measured changes in agency.

A next step is to operationalise the concept through observations of decision-making, accounts of mentoring interactions, and longitudinal follow-up across different teacher education programmes. Heutagogy and teacher heteronomy can inform the same design question: how can beginning teachers choose, investigate, and evaluate problems of practice while learning with others and retaining responsibility for their decisions?

The study has four principal limitations. First, the non-probability survey sample is unevenly distributed across countries and cannot support representative Ibero-American comparisons. Second, questionnaire items were designed for a project needs assessment, not as a direct measure of autonomy; validation procedures and item-level information require fuller reporting. Third, a single six-person focus group in Spain offers contextual detail but cannot stand for survey respondents across different systems; recruitment, recording, transcription, and translation procedures must be documented. Fourth, the cross-sectional and self-reported data do not establish developmental or causal claims, and gender and other relevant demographic variables were not systematically analysed. Longitudinal and comparative studies could examine when relationships support or inhibit teachers' independent judgment.

The proposed concept accordingly invites empirical work on both enabling and constraining relationships in school and digital communities. Initial teacher education can use structured mentorship, reflective practice, and genuine choices in inquiry as design possibilities, whose effects should be examined rather than assumed. The DigitalTA platform offers a possible site for such future research on participation and self-determined professional learning.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/Supplementary Material.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee of the European University of the Atlantic (UNEATLANTICO). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written

informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements.

Author contributions

TP: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CE: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. ES: Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. JA: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI was used in order to translating text in Introduction from Spanish to English.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2026.1961160/full#supplementary-material

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