

Professional Trust and Teacher Autonomy in Post-Pandemic Elementary Education

Candace Smith* 

Governors State University, Assistant Professor, College of Education and Human Development,
University Park, Illinois, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teacher perceptions of professional trust and autonomy in elementary education following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from survey responses and in-depth interviews with K-5 teachers, this research explores how teachers define empowerment, identify barriers to professional autonomy, and conceptualize the role of trust in their work. Findings reveal that teachers seek recognition as professionals with expertise, desire meaningful input in decision-making processes, and require protected time for authentic pedagogical work. The post-pandemic context has intensified existing tensions between administrative requirements and professional judgment, highlighting the need for systemic approaches that honor teacher expertise while maintaining accountability. This article contributes to ongoing discussions about teacher retention, professional development, and educational reform by centering teacher voice in understanding what conditions enable or constrain professional practice.

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***Corresponding Author:** Candace Smith, csmith49@govst.edu



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted American education, forcing rapid transitions to remote learning, implementing constantly changing safety protocols, and requiring teachers to adapt pedagogical practices under unprecedented stress. While much attention has focused on learning loss and student mental health, less systematic examination has occurred regarding how the pandemic affected teachers' professional autonomy and their relationships with school leadership. This gap in understanding is particularly significant given ongoing teacher shortages, high attrition rates, and persistent questions about teacher satisfaction and retention.

This study centers teacher voice in understanding professional trust and autonomy within post-pandemic elementary education. Rather than imposing predetermined definitions of empowerment, this research asked teachers themselves to articulate what conditions enable or constrain their professional practice. Through 261 survey responses and 4 in-depth interviews with K-5 teachers, this study explores how teachers conceptualize professional trust, what forms of autonomy they consider essential to their work, and how the pandemic context has influenced their professional experiences.

The findings presented here illuminate a persistent tension in contemporary elementary education: while teachers are increasingly positioned as deliverers of predetermined curriculum and assessments, they simultaneously seek recognition as professionals with specialized expertise who require meaningful autonomy to meet their students' diverse needs. This tension has intensified in the post-pandemic context, as administrative requirements have expanded while teachers' time, energy, and resources have diminished.

Positionality Statement

As a former K-5 classroom teacher, principal, and current teacher educator, the researcher brings both insider knowledge and critical distance to this research, as well as 20 years of experience in elementary classrooms inform my understanding of the daily realities that teachers navigate, while a current role in higher education allows for the examination of these experiences through analytical and theoretical lenses. The researcher has experienced firsthand the tensions between administrative mandates and professional judgment, the impact of standardized testing on instructional autonomy, and the profound effects of collegial support on professional sustainability. This dual perspective shapes both research questions and the interpretation of participant voices. The researcher's experiences may create assumptions about what constitutes "empowerment" or "autonomy," and has worked throughout this study to remain open to participants' diverse definitions and experiences. Additionally, as a white, middle-class educator working primarily in suburban districts, the researcher's perspective is shaped by particular social and professional contexts that may not reflect the experiences of all teachers. This positionality statement serves to make visible the lens through which this research has analyzed data and presented findings.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do K-5 teachers define professional empowerment in their current contexts?
2. What specific aspects of professional trust and autonomy do teachers identify as essential to their work?
3. What barriers to professional autonomy do teachers experience in post-pandemic elementary education?
4. What conditions do teachers identify as supporting meaningful professional autonomy?

Literature Review

Teacher Autonomy and Professional Trust

Teacher autonomy, meaning the degree to which teachers have control over their professional practice, has long been recognized as central to both teacher satisfaction and instructional effectiveness. Research consistently demonstrates that teachers with greater autonomy experience higher job satisfaction, lower burnout rates, and greater commitment to the profession. However, the definition and scope of professional autonomy remain contested in educational discourse.

Pearson and Moomaw (2005) distinguish between technical autonomy (control over instructional methods and materials) and organizational autonomy (influence over school-level decisions affecting teaching conditions). While teachers may possess some technical autonomy in how they implement mandated curricula, they frequently lack organizational autonomy to shape broader policies affecting their work. This distinction is particularly salient in the contemporary accountability context, where curricular pacing guides, standardized assessments, and data requirements increasingly constrain technical autonomy.

Professional trust emerges as both a prerequisite for and a product of meaningful autonomy. Tschannen-Moran (2009) conceptualizes trust in schools as multidimensional, encompassing trust between teachers and administrators, among colleagues, with students and families, and with the broader community. When teachers perceive that their professional judgment is trusted, they are more likely to take instructional risks, collaborate with colleagues, and persist in facing challenges. Conversely, when trust is absent, teachers may adopt compliance-oriented approaches that prioritize accountability measures over student needs.

The Post-Pandemic Educational Context

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for teachers, requiring rapid adaptation to remote instruction, implementation of constantly changing safety protocols, and navigation of intense political polarization regarding school operations. Kim and Asbury (2020) documented how "the speed at which schools and teachers were required to enact major operational and emotional changes led to a strong emphasis on uncertainty." This uncertainty, combined with constantly shifting requirements, created extraordinary stress for educators, particularly at the elementary level where developmental needs required creative problem-solving in novel contexts.

While some hoped the pandemic might catalyze educational transformation, Hollweck and Doucet (2022) caution against romanticizing this potential, reminding us that "normal public education did not serve all children well or equitably." The pandemic both revealed and exacerbated existing inequities in resources, access to technology, and support services. Rather than creating new problems, the pandemic intensified and made visible long-standing systemic issues in American education.

The pandemic period also highlighted teachers' adaptability and professional expertise. Teachers rapidly developed new pedagogical approaches, strengthened relationships with colleagues and families, and demonstrated remarkable resilience in unprecedented circumstances. However, this period also intensified existing tensions regarding professional autonomy, as emergency mandates often superseded teacher judgment and administrative control tightened in response to crisis conditions. Understanding how teachers experienced professional trust and autonomy during and after this period offers important insights into broader questions about teacher empowerment and retention.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to understand teacher

experiences of professional trust and autonomy: critical pedagogy, systems thinking, and transformational leadership theory.

Critical pedagogy, particularly Giroux's (1988) concept of teachers as "transformative intellectuals," provides a lens for examining how teachers are positioned within educational systems. Giroux argues that when teachers are treated as "clerks or technicians" responsible only for implementing predetermined curricula, their specialized knowledge and professional judgment are devalued. This framework helps illuminate how structural conditions either enable or constrain teachers' capacity to exercise professional judgment and respond to their students' specific needs.

Systems thinking, as articulated by Senge et al. (2023), emphasizes the interconnected nature of educational challenges and the importance of examining how policies and practices at one level of a system affect dynamics at other levels. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how district-level accountability requirements, building-level administrative decisions, and classroom-level instructional practices interact to shape teachers' professional experiences. Systems thinking encourages examination of feedback loops and unintended consequences—for example, how policies intended to ensure instructional quality may paradoxically reduce teachers' capacity to meet diverse student needs.

Transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) offers a framework for understanding the role of school leadership in creating conditions for teacher empowerment. Transformational leadership emphasizes "individualized consideration"—attending to each teacher's professional needs and development—and "intellectual stimulation"—encouraging innovation and critical reflection. This framework helps identify specific leadership practices that either support or undermine professional trust and autonomy.

Together, these frameworks provide multiple lenses for examining teacher experiences. Critical pedagogy highlights power dynamics and structural constraints; systems thinking illuminates interconnections and feedback loops; transformational leadership theory focuses attention on specific practices that create enabling conditions. Rather than privileging one perspective, this study uses all three to develop a nuanced understanding of professional trust and autonomy in contemporary elementary education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, beginning with a broad survey to identify patterns in teacher perceptions and following with in-depth interviews to explore the nuances and contexts of these experiences. This approach allowed both breadth (understanding general patterns across a substantial sample) and depth (exploring the meanings and contexts behind reported experiences).

Participants

Survey participants included 261 K-5 teachers from across multiple school districts in the Midwest region. Participants represented diverse years of experience (ranging from first-year teachers to those with 30+ years in the profession), grade levels (K-5), and school contexts (urban, suburban, and rural districts). The sample included both general education and specialist teachers (e.g., special education, ELL, arts).

Interview participants were a purposive subsample of 66 survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate in follow-up interviews and who represented diverse perspectives and experiences. Interview participants included teachers at various career stages, from multiple districts,

and with varying relationships to leadership (some with positive experiences, some with significant concerns). This purposive approach ensured that the interview data captured a range of perspectives, rather than only those of the most satisfied or most frustrated teachers.

A summary of the demographic characteristics of both the survey and interview samples is provided in Table 1, offering a clear overview of the teachers who contributed to this study.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Category	Description
Survey Participants (N)	261 K–5 teachers
Interview Participants (N)	4 K–5 teachers
Years of Teaching Experience	1–5, 6–10, 11–20, 20+
Grade Levels Represented	Kindergarten through Grade 5
School Settings	Urban, Suburban, Rural
Teacher Roles	General Education, Special Education, ELL, Arts, Specialists

Data Collection

Survey data were collected during the 2022-2023 school year through an online questionnaire that included both closed-ended (Likert-scale) questions about various dimensions of teacher empowerment and open-ended questions asking teachers to describe their experiences in their own words. Key survey questions included: "How do you define teacher empowerment?" "What conditions support your sense of professional autonomy?" "What barriers to empowerment do you experience?" "How has the pandemic affected your professional experience?"

Interview data were collected through semi-structured virtual interviews lasting 45-75 minutes each. Interview questions explored themes that emerged from survey data, asking teachers to elaborate on their definitions of empowerment, describe specific experiences related to professional trust and autonomy, discuss their relationships with school leadership, and reflect on how the pandemic had affected their professional practice. Interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Survey responses (both quantitative ratings and open-ended text) were analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Initial coding employed an open-coding approach, allowing themes to emerge from the participants' language rather than imposing predetermined categories. Early analysis revealed four major themes related to teacher empowerment, one of which, professional trust and autonomy, is the focus of this article.

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis, with particular attention to how teachers articulated their experiences of professional trust, the specific forms of autonomy they valued, and the barriers they identified. Analysis involved multiple rounds of coding, memo-writing to develop analytical insights, and ongoing comparison between emerging themes and existing literature. Throughout analysis, participant language was preserved and centered, with particular attention to how teachers themselves defined and discussed professional empowerment rather than imposing researcher-generated definitions.

Theme development involved iterative refinement, with ongoing checking between codes, themes, and raw data to ensure that themes accurately represented participant experiences. Analytic memos documented the development of themes and connections between them. Member checking was conducted with a subset of interview participants to verify that interpretations resonated with their

experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This study received IRB approval from [Institution]. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. Participant names, school names, and district names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Given that some participants described difficult relationships with school leadership or frustrations with working conditions, particular care was taken to protect participant confidentiality while presenting findings that accurately represent their experiences.

Limitations

This study is limited by its geographic scope (Midwest region), timing (post-pandemic context which may not represent "typical" conditions), and sampling approach (convenience sample that may overrepresent teachers with strong opinions about empowerment). Additionally, as noted in the positionality statement, my own experiences as a former elementary teacher shape both my interpretations and the aspects of teacher experience I attended to most closely. These limitations are addressed through thick description of context, transparency about analytical processes, and attention to disconfirming evidence and alternative interpretations.

Findings: Professional Trust and Autonomy

Analysis of both survey and interview data revealed that professional trust and autonomy constitute a central dimension of how teachers understand empowerment. This theme encompasses teachers' desires for recognition as professionals with specialized expertise, meaningful voice in decisions affecting their work, and sufficient autonomy to exercise professional judgment in meeting their students' needs. The findings presented below are organized around three key sub-themes: (1) recognition of professional expertise, (2) meaningful voice and input, and (3) time and space for authentic pedagogical work.

To illustrate how these three dimensions appeared across both the survey and interview data, Table 2 presents each overarching theme alongside its corresponding subthemes and a representative quotation. This summary provides a concise view of how teachers articulated the conditions that enable or constrain their sense of professional trust and autonomy.

Recognition of Professional Expertise

Teachers consistently emphasized their desire to be recognized as professionals with specialized knowledge and expertise. One survey respondent captured this sentiment clearly: "Teacher empowerment is feeling validated, encouraged, supported, and trusted by other staff and administration. Giving educators the tools and authority to improve teaching and learning." This definition centers trust and validation alongside more concrete resources and authority.

Many teachers contrasted this desired recognition with their actual experiences. Another teacher elaborated: "The expertise teachers possess is respected and listened to when it comes to developing new ideas. That our input is taken seriously, not just platitudes and lip service about how valuable we are." This comment points to a gap between rhetorical acknowledgment of teacher value and actual incorporation of teacher expertise in decision-making.

Interview data revealed how this gap manifests in daily practice. Sarah, a fourth-grade teacher with 12 years of experience, described a recurring dynamic: "They tell us we're professionals, that they trust us, that they value our expertise. But then every decision is already made before they ask us. The curriculum is purchased, the schedule is set, the assessment windows are non-negotiable. So where

exactly is my professional judgment supposed to come in?" Her comment illustrates how structural constraints can contradict stated values about teacher professionalism.

Table 2
Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quote
Recognition of Professional Expertise	Validation of Teacher Knowledge	"Teacher empowerment is feeling validated, encouraged, supported, and trusted by other staff and administration."
Recognition of Professional Expertise	Respect for Professional Judgment	"I didn't get a master's degree to be a script reader. I'm not a robot. I'm a professional who knows these kids."
Meaningful Voice and Input	Authentic Decision-Making Power	"We piloted programs, reviewed the data, and our principal actually listened to our recommendation."
Meaningful Voice and Input	Performative Consultation	"It felt worse than not being asked at all because it was such obvious theater."
Time and Space for Authentic Work	Administrative Burden	"I spend at least six hours a week just entering data. That's six hours I'm not planning meaningful lessons."
Time and Space for Authentic Work	Rigid Pacing and Constraints	"If my students don't understand place value, I can't spend time helping them—I have to move on. It's pedagogically insane."

Teachers particularly resented what they perceived as performative consultation—being asked for input on decisions that had already been made. Maria, a first-grade teacher, described: "We had this big initiative about 'teacher voice' and 'shared decision-making.' They formed all these committees and had us do all this work. But in the end, they did exactly what they were going to do anyway. It felt worse than not being asked at all, honestly, because it was such obvious theater." These experiences of symbolic rather than substantive consultation appeared to actively undermine trust rather than building it.

The theoretical framework of critical pedagogy helps illuminate these dynamics. When teachers are positioned as "clerks or technicians" responsible only for implementing decisions made elsewhere, their specialized knowledge about child development, pedagogy, and their specific students' needs is devalued. Several teachers explicitly resisted this positioning. James, a fifth-grade teacher, stated emphatically: "I didn't get a master's degree to be a script reader. I'm not a robot. I'm a professional who knows these kids and knows how to teach. But the system doesn't really want professionals—it wants compliant workers who follow the program."

Meaningful Voice and Input in Decision-Making

Beyond general recognition of expertise, teachers specifically desired meaningful voice in decisions that directly affected their work. This included curriculum selection, schedule design, assessment practices, and professional development planning. Teachers distinguished between authentic consultation, where their input genuinely shaped decisions, and performative consultation where their perspectives were solicited but ignored.

Several teachers described positive experiences of genuine collaboration with leadership. Jennifer, a kindergarten teacher, described her principal's approach: "When we were looking at new literacy materials, our principal actually had us do a thorough review. We piloted different programs, collected data about how they worked with our kids, and had real discussions about pros and cons. And then she actually listened to our recommendation. It made such a difference to feel like our professional

judgment mattered." This example illustrates how authentic consultation operates—with sufficient time, genuine consideration of teacher input, and visible incorporation of teacher perspectives in final decisions.

However, more teachers described experiences where their input was solicited but ultimately dismissed. Rachel, a third-grade teacher, recounted: "They asked us what we needed for math instruction. We were very clear, we needed more manipulatives, more time for small group work, better support for our ELL students. Instead, they bought this expensive computer program that requires us to give up our small group time so kids can sit at computers. It was so frustrating because they literally asked us and then did the opposite of what we said." This pattern, of asking for input but proceeding with predetermined plans, emerged repeatedly in the data and appeared to actively damage trust.

The pandemic intensified these dynamics in complex ways. On one hand, some teachers reported increased autonomy during remote instruction as they had to independently problem-solve unprecedented challenges. On the other hand, many teachers experienced the pandemic period as characterized by increased top-down control, constantly changing mandates, and reduced space for professional judgment. Michelle, a second-grade teacher, reflected: "During COVID, everything was mandated ,what platform to use, what assignments to give, even what to say in parent emails. I get that there was chaos and they wanted consistency, but it really drove home how little they trust us to make good decisions. They'd rather have mediocre uniformity than excellence with variation."

Systems thinking helps illuminate how policies intended to ensure quality or consistency can paradoxically reduce teachers' capacity to respond effectively to diverse student needs. The teachers in this study repeatedly described how district-level mandates, even when well-intentioned, constrained their ability to exercise professional judgment at the classroom level. This represents a classic systems problem: interventions at one level of the system (district administration) create unintended consequences at another level (classroom instruction) because they fail to account for the complexity of teaching and learning.

Time and Space for Authentic Pedagogical Work

A particularly striking finding involved teachers' concerns about how administrative requirements consumed time and energy needed for authentic teaching work. Many teachers described spending substantial time on data entry, compliance documentation, and other administrative tasks that they perceived as disconnected from actual instruction.

One survey respondent captured this frustration: "Multiple teachers reported using a majority of the time inputting the assessment data as required." This comment, although brief, highlights a significant issue: when teachers spend more time documenting learning than facilitating it, something is fundamentally misaligned. Interview participants elaborated extensively on this dynamic.

Kevin, a fifth-grade teacher, described a typical week: "I spend at least six hours a week just entering data into various systems. Reading benchmark scores, math benchmark scores, behavior tracking, attendance, plus all the IEP documentation for my special ed students. That's six hours I'm not planning engaging lessons, not conferencing with students, not designing creative activities. It's six hours of clerical work that, honestly, I don't think anyone even looks at most of the time." His estimate of six hours weekly for data entry, more than one full school day, represents a substantial diversion of professional energy from pedagogical work.

Several teachers explicitly connected this data-entry burden to questions of professional trust. Lisa, a first-grade teacher, reflected: "All this documentation is supposed to prove we're doing our jobs. But it assumes we wouldn't do our jobs otherwise. It's built on distrust. And ironically, it makes us worse

teachers because we're spending time on paperwork instead of kids." Her analysis points to a fundamental tension: accountability measures intended to ensure quality may actually undermine quality by consuming resources needed for effective practice.

Teachers also described how rigid curriculum pacing guides constrained their ability to respond to student needs. Amber, a third-grade teacher, explained: "We have a pacing guide that tells us exactly what to teach each day. But if my students don't understand place value on Tuesday, I can't spend Wednesday helping them master it, I have to move on to the next topic because that's what the guide says. It's pedagogically insane, but we're held accountable to the pacing guide, not to whether kids actually learn." Her comment illustrates how curricular mandates can force teachers to prioritize coverage over understanding, compliance over responsiveness.

The concept of teachers as "transformative intellectuals" is relevant here. When teachers are required to implement standardized pacing guides regardless of student needs, when their time is consumed by documentation requirements, and when their professional judgment about how to support student learning is superseded by administrative mandates, they are positioned as technicians rather than professionals. Several teachers explicitly resisted this positioning, asserting their right and responsibility to exercise professional judgment even when it conflicted with mandates.

However, such resistance came with risks. Multiple teachers described being reprimanded for deviating from required curricula or pacing guides, even when their adaptations better served student needs. This created a difficult choice: comply with mandates and compromise instructional quality, or exercise professional judgment and risk professional consequences. The teachers in this study overwhelmingly prioritized student needs over compliance, but they experienced this choice as evidence of systemic failure rather than as a sustainable approach to professional practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study illuminate several important tensions in contemporary elementary education, particularly regarding professional trust and teacher autonomy. These tensions have implications for understanding teacher retention, instructional quality, and possibilities for educational reform.

The conceptual model presented in **Figure 1** illustrates how the three major dimensions identified in this study—recognition of professional expertise, meaningful voice in decision-making, and time and space for authentic pedagogical work, collectively shape teachers' experiences of professional trust and autonomy. Each component represents a core condition that teachers described as necessary for exercising professional judgment. As the figure demonstrates, these elements operate not in isolation but as mutually reinforcing domains that converge to support or inhibit teachers' sense of professional empowerment.

The Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

Perhaps the most striking finding involves the disconnect between stated values about teacher professionalism and actual conditions of practice. Teachers consistently reported being told they are valued professionals, yet simultaneously experienced conditions that contradicted this message, including predetermined curricula, rigid pacing guides, excessive documentation requirements, and performative rather than authentic consultation. This gap between rhetoric and reality appeared to actively damage trust rather than simply representing neutral background conditions.

This finding aligns with research on organizational trust, which emphasizes the importance of aligning espoused values with enacted practices. When leaders profess to value teacher input but

consistently override teacher recommendations, or when professional development emphasizes teacher agency while policies constrain it, teachers perceive hypocrisy rather than simply disagreement. This perceived hypocrisy undermines trust more severely than would honest acknowledgment of constraints.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of Professional Trust & Autonomy



The implications for leadership practice are significant. Rather than a performative consultation that solicits teacher input on predetermined decisions, transformational leadership involves genuine collaboration where teacher expertise substantively shapes outcomes. This requires not only different communication practices but also different power structures, shifting from hierarchical decision-making, where teachers are consulted but administrators make the decisions, toward collaborative decision-making, where teachers participate substantively in shaping practices that affect their work.

These patterns are further illustrated in **Table 3**, which contrasts the rhetoric commonly communicated by school and district leaders with the realities teachers described in their daily practice. This comparison highlights how misalignment between stated values and enacted conditions erodes professional trust and constrains meaningful autonomy.

Systems-Level Tensions

The findings also illustrate classic systems problems in education. Policies enacted at district or state levels (standardized assessments, curricular mandates, accountability requirements) create conditions at the classroom level that constrain teachers' capacity to respond effectively to diverse student needs. These constraints are often invisible to policymakers who design accountability systems without fully understanding their operational implications.

Systems thinking suggests that sustainable improvement requires attention to feedback loops and unintended consequences. The teachers in this study described multiple feedback loops that undermine instructional quality: accountability requirements consume time needed for instruction; standardized curricula reduce teachers' ability to meet diverse student needs; documentation demands divert energy from pedagogical innovation. These dynamics represent not isolated problems but systemic patterns that require systemic solutions.

Addressing these systems-level tensions requires reconceptualizing accountability itself. Rather than accountability as compliance with external mandates (which positions teachers as implementers of others' decisions), accountability could be understood as professional responsibility to student learning (which positions teachers as experts making informed judgments). This shift would require different approaches to assessment, supervision, and evaluation—approaches that honor rather than constrain professional expertise.

Table 3*Rhetoric vs. Reality in Autonomy*

Espoused Administrative Rhetoric	Observed Reality Reported by Teachers	Resulting Impact on Trust/Autonomy
“We value teacher voice in decision-making.”	Teachers asked for input after decisions were already made; committees formed but final outcomes predetermined.	Perception of symbolic rather than authentic consultation; diminished trust in leadership.
“Teachers are trusted professionals.”	Rigid pacing guides and scripted curricula limited professional judgment; deviations discouraged or reprimanded.	Teachers felt treated as implementers rather than experts, reducing autonomy and professional confidence.
“Our goal is to support instructional quality.”	Excessive documentation requirements consumed instructional planning time and often appeared unused.	Administrative demands reduced time for pedagogical work, undermining instructional effectiveness.
“We encourage innovation and creativity.”	Teachers reported pressure to maintain uniformity across grade levels, limiting experimentation.	Innovation perceived as risky; teachers avoided instructional creativity due to compliance pressures.
“We are committed to collaboration and shared leadership.”	Collaborative structures existed, but teachers felt their expertise was overridden by district mandates.	Eroded sense of shared leadership; teachers felt excluded from meaningful decision-making.

Post-Pandemic Context and Intensification

The pandemic context is significant not because it created new problems but because it intensified and made visible existing tensions. Teachers' descriptions of pandemic-era experiences—increased mandates, reduced autonomy, performative rather than supportive leadership—represent amplifications of pre-existing patterns rather than entirely new dynamics.

This intensification created what some teachers described as a breaking point. Conditions that were tolerable (if frustrating) in normal times became untenable when combined with pandemic stress, family responsibilities, health concerns, and political polarization. Several interview participants explicitly stated that the pandemic had fundamentally changed their relationship to teaching, not because remote instruction was difficult but because the pandemic revealed how little their professional expertise was truly valued.

The implications for retention are significant. Research consistently shows that teacher satisfaction and retention are more strongly predicted by working conditions (including autonomy and administrative support) than by compensation. If the pandemic has made long-standing problems in working conditions more visible and less tolerable, addressing teacher retention requires attending to these structural issues rather than only recruitment or compensation strategies.

Implications for Practice

These findings have several implications for educational practice and policy:

For school administrators: The findings suggest that building professional trust requires moving beyond rhetorical acknowledgment of teacher expertise toward structural changes that enable teachers to exercise professional judgment. This includes genuine collaboration in decision-making, reduction of administrative burdens that consume time needed for instruction, and flexibility in curriculum implementation that allows teachers to respond to student needs. Importantly, it requires acknowledging when constraints exist rather than performing consultation when decisions are predetermined.

For district leaders and policymakers: The findings highlight how district and state-level policies can inadvertently constrain instructional quality even when intended to ensure it. Policymakers should attend to systems-level feedback loops, seeking teacher input not only about policy content but about operational implications and unintended consequences. Assessment and accountability systems should be redesigned to honor rather than constrain professional expertise.

For teacher preparation programs: These findings suggest that teacher preparation should include explicit attention to professional autonomy and voice. New teachers need not only pedagogical skills but also an understanding of how to navigate systems that may constrain their practice, how to advocate for students and themselves, and how to maintain professional integrity in challenging contexts. Teacher education should prepare teachers to be "transformative intellectuals" rather than compliant implementers.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its geographic scope, timing, and sampling approach. The sample was drawn from Midwest districts during the immediate post-pandemic period, which may not represent conditions in other regions or time periods. Additionally, participation was voluntary, potentially overrepresenting teachers with strong perspectives on empowerment and autonomy.

Future research should examine several questions raised by these findings:

How do experiences of professional trust and autonomy differ across different school contexts (urban/suburban/rural, high-poverty/affluent, various racial/ethnic compositions)?

What specific leadership practices most effectively build authentic professional trust?• How do teachers navigate the tension between compliance with mandates and responsiveness to student needs?

What are the long-term retention implications of teachers' experiences of professional autonomy?

How might accountability systems be redesigned to honor rather than constrain professional expertise?

CONCLUSION

This study has examined K-5 teachers' experiences of professional trust and autonomy in post-pandemic elementary education. Drawing from 261 survey responses and in-depth interviews, the findings reveal that teachers seek recognition as professionals with specialized expertise, desire meaningful voice in decisions affecting their work, and require sufficient autonomy to exercise professional judgment in meeting student needs.

The study also reveals significant tensions between stated values about teacher professionalism and actual conditions of practice. Teachers consistently report being told they are valued while experiencing conditions that contradict this message: predetermined curricula, rigid pacing guides,

excessive documentation requirements, and performative rather than authentic consultation. These tensions have intensified in the post-pandemic context, creating what some teachers describe as a breaking point.

Addressing these tensions requires more than rhetorical acknowledgment of teacher expertise. It requires structural changes that genuinely enable teachers to exercise professional judgment: authentic collaboration in decision-making, reduction of administrative burdens, flexibility in curriculum implementation, and accountability systems that honor rather than constrain professional expertise. Such changes are essential not only for teacher satisfaction and retention but ultimately for instructional quality and student learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and intensified long-standing problems in how American education values (or fails to value) teacher expertise. Rather than rushing to return to pre-pandemic norms, this moment offers an opportunity to fundamentally reconsider how we structure teaching work, what forms of accountability actually support instructional quality, and what conditions enable teachers to exercise the professional judgment that drew them to the profession. The teachers in this study have clearly articulated what they need to do their work well. The question is whether educational systems will respond.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted by the named researcher.

Ethics Committee Approval

Approval was in accordance with IRB standards.

Author Contributions

Research Design (CRediT 1) Author 1 (100%)

Data Collection (CRediT 2) Author 1 (100%)

Research - Data analysis - Validation (CRediT 3-4-6-11) Author 1 (100%)

Writing the Article (CRediT 12-13) Author 1 (100%)

Revision and Improvement of the Text (CRediT 14) Author 1 (100%)

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest exists.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Not applicable.

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