



**FROM CENTRALIZATION TO PARTICIPATION:
UNDERSTANDING DECISION-MAKING
IN ROMANIAN PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

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Abstract

Decision-making autonomy in educational institutions has been consistently associated with professional satisfaction, organizational justice, leadership, and the quality of educational outcomes. While international research emphasizes the positive implications of teacher autonomy for school effectiveness, empirical evidence from early childhood education in Romania remains limited. This article presents a quantitative study investigating the relationships between decision-making autonomy, job satisfaction, leadership, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making among preschool teachers and managers. Using a cross-sectional design with an original questionnaire adapted from validated international instruments, data were collected from 113 participants in public and private preschools. Statistical analyses revealed significant associations between leadership and job satisfaction, leadership and desired autonomy, and procedural justice and job satisfaction, while correlations between perceived autonomy and job satisfaction were not significant. Results highlight the important role of transparent decision-making processes and participatory leadership in shaping teachers' perceptions of fairness and professional fulfillment. The findings contribute to the understanding of decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool education and suggest practical directions for strengthening participatory management.

Keywords: *decision-making autonomy, preschool education, leadership, job satisfaction, procedural justice, Romania.*

1. Introduction

Decision-making autonomy represents one of the most debated topics in contemporary educational research, situated at the intersection of organizational theory, leadership studies, and policy reform. Within educational institutions, the degree of freedom granted to managers and teachers to adapt decisions to their specific contexts is widely regarded as a determinant of organizational effectiveness, teacher motivation, and ultimately, student learning outcomes (Bush, 2020; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The issue becomes even more salient in early childhood education, where decision-making processes are deeply interwoven with the daily pedagogical, emotional, and relational experiences of young children and their families. In this sector, rigid or delayed decisions can have immediate and lasting effects on child development, institutional climate, and community trust.

In Romania, the question of autonomy has long been conditioned by the country's historical trajectory and the legacies of centralized governance. The pre-university system, encompassing preschool education, remains governed by detailed regulations, curricular frameworks, and oversight from inspectorates, which significantly restrict institutional discretion (Stoica, 2019). While recent national and European policy documents emphasize decentralization and participatory governance, autonomy often remains more formal than substantive, with managers and teachers expected to comply with externally mandated procedures rather than adapt them to local needs (Răduț, 2008). This tension between centralization and autonomy forms the backdrop against which this study is situated.

This study examines decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions through the lens of the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model of decision-making. Initially developed by Victor Vroom and Philip Yetton in 1973, and subsequently refined in collaboration with Arthur Jago, this model constitutes one of the most influential frameworks for understanding participatory decision-making in organizations. Unlike classical leadership theories that advocate a single “best” style of decision-making, the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model proposes a contingency approach: the effectiveness of a decision depends not only on its content but also on how the decision is reached, the degree of participation involved, and the specific contextual factors at play (Vroom & Jago, 1978; Tjosvold et al., 1986).

According to the model, leaders must evaluate a series of diagnostic questions concerning the importance of decision quality, the need for acceptance by subordinates, the leader's knowledge of the problem, the structure of the problem, and the time constraints involved. Based on these questions, the model generates recommendations for the most appropriate decision-making

style, ranging along a continuum from autocratic (AI, AII) to consultative (CI, CII) and group-based (GII). For example, in situations where time is scarce and the leader possesses adequate expertise, an autocratic style may be optimal. Conversely, when staff acceptance is highly important for implementation, a consultative or group decision-making process may yield better results. In this sense, the model transcends dichotomies such as “authoritarian versus democratic leadership,” providing a nuanced framework that emphasizes situational appropriateness and flexibility.

Applying this model to preschool education provides a particularly rich perspective. Preschool institutions are characterized by complex decision-making scenarios that span administrative, pedagogical, and relational domains. Decisions may involve allocating limited resources, adapting the curriculum to meet the developmental needs of children, managing unforeseen events such as conflicts or accidents, or negotiating with parents and community members. In each of these contexts, the balance between decision quality, acceptance, expertise, and urgency varies considerably. The Vroom–Yetton–Jago model thus provides a structured approach for determining when decisions should be made unilaterally by directors, when consultation with staff is essential, and when collective group decisions are most appropriate.

Despite its prominence in organizational and educational leadership literature internationally, the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model has received limited empirical application in Romania, particularly in the preschool sector. Most Romanian studies on school leadership have remained descriptive, focusing on the structural constraints of centralization or the normative calls for decentralization, without examining the actual processes by which decisions are made at the institutional level (Mitulescu, 2017). By contrast, this study attempts to operationalize the model in the specific context of Romanian preschools, thereby filling a critical gap in both national and international literature.

The relevance of focusing on preschool education cannot be overstated. Research in developmental psychology and pedagogy has consistently shown that early childhood experiences have a profound impact on cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The ability of preschool institutions to provide high-quality, adaptive, and inclusive educational environments depends not only on curriculum and resources but also on the efficiency and legitimacy of decision-making processes. When teachers and managers perceive autonomy, fairness, and meaningful participation, the institutional climate improves, professional satisfaction increases, and innovation is encouraged (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Conversely, when

autonomy is absent, decision-making becomes rigid, top-down, and often ineffective in responding to the diverse needs of children and families.

At the European level, countries with high-performing educational systems such as Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands consistently emphasize institutional autonomy and participatory management as key principles (Sahlberg, 2021). Directors in these systems enjoy extended competencies in managing resources and adapting curricula, while teachers are actively involved in daily decision-making. Comparative analyses reveal that such practices are strongly correlated with both teacher motivation and educational outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). By contrast, in Romania, autonomy often remains declarative, constrained by bureaucratic requirements, insufficient managerial training, and a culture of compliance that has been inherited from decades of centralized governance.

Against this backdrop, the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model provides a valuable theoretical lens for analyzing how autonomy could be effectively structured and distributed within Romanian preschools. The model highlights that autonomy is not a binary concept—present or absent—but rather a spectrum of participatory possibilities that can and should vary depending on the problem at hand. It also emphasizes that the legitimacy and effectiveness of decisions are enhanced when participation is aligned with contextual needs, rather than applied uniformly. For example, while certain procedural or safety decisions may appropriately remain within the director's authority, pedagogical adaptations and classroom-level innovations may benefit from broader teacher involvement.

The present study, therefore, positions decision-making autonomy not as an abstract right but as a situated practice, shaped by institutional structures, leadership styles, and cultural expectations. By operationalizing autonomy through the constructs of perceived autonomy, desired autonomy, procedural justice, job satisfaction, leadership, and emotion-based decision-making, the study aims to provide a multidimensional understanding of how autonomy is experienced and negotiated in Romanian preschools. Furthermore, by testing the associations between these variables, it seeks to identify the specific pathways through which autonomy—or its absence—affects professional satisfaction and organizational functioning.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Decision-making autonomy in education

Decision-making autonomy is generally defined as the degree of control that professionals exercise over their work, particularly in relation to planning, implementation, and evaluation

(Iucu, 2000; Verhoest et al., 2004). In educational contexts, autonomy extends across multiple dimensions: administrative autonomy, which involves control over institutional resources, timetables, and organizational structures; curricular autonomy, which refers to the adaptation of curricular content and teaching strategies to local needs; and pedagogical autonomy, which encompasses the freedom of teachers to design learning activities, assessment strategies, and classroom management practices (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

The literature consistently demonstrates that teacher autonomy contributes to a range of positive outcomes, including increased motivation, job satisfaction, and instructional quality (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). At the same time, autonomy is not an unqualified good; it requires alignment with institutional responsibilities and accountability mechanisms. Autonomy, therefore, must be conceptualized as a balance between professional discretion and systemic coherence. The Vroom–Yetton–Jago model adds nuance to this understanding by framing autonomy not as a constant but as a variable degree of participation in decision-making, contingent on situational demands (Vroom & Jago, 1978).

2.2. Leadership and autonomy

Leadership plays a crucial role in determining how autonomy is distributed and experienced within educational organizations. In traditional bureaucratic models, leadership tends to centralize authority in the hands of directors or administrators, leaving teachers with limited discretion in decision-making. By contrast, transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, and empowerment, encouraging teachers to take initiative and contribute actively to institutional development (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Distributed leadership further extends this logic by recognizing leadership as a shared organizational resource rather than an individual trait, creating opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership roles within teams, committees, or projects (Spillane & Camburn, 2006).

Empirical studies suggested that participatory leadership enhances teachers' perceptions of autonomy, strengthens their professional identity, and increases their organizational commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Within the Vroom–Yetton–Jago framework, leadership is directly linked to decision-making style: leaders must assess whether decisions should be made unilaterally, in consultation with teachers, or collectively. Thus, leadership is not only about vision and influence but also about calibrating levels of participation in ways that maximize decision quality and legitimacy. In Romanian preschool institutions, where formal autonomy is restricted, leadership style can significantly affect whether staff feel empowered or marginalized in decision-making.

2.3. The Vroom–Yetton–Jago Model in Educational Contexts

The Vroom–Yetton–Jago decision-making model represents one of the most influential frameworks in organizational psychology for understanding how leaders involve others in the decision-making process. Formulated initially by Victor Vroom and Philip Yetton (1973) and later refined by Arthur Jago, the model rejects the idea of a single “best” leadership style, instead proposing a contingency-based approach. According to the model, effective decision-making depends not only on the technical quality of a decision but also on its acceptance by those responsible for implementation and the context in which the decision is made (Vroom & Jago, 1978).

The model identifies a continuum of five decision-making styles, ranging from autocratic to group-based. In the autocratic (A1) style, the leader makes decisions alone, using only the information already available. In autocratic II (A2), the leader seeks information from subordinates but still makes the decision independently. Consultative I (C1) involves discussing the problem with selected individuals before making a decision. At the same time, consultative II (C2) entails presenting the problem to a group, gathering suggestions, and then making a decision independently. Finally, group-based II (G2) represents the highest level of participation, where the leader facilitates discussion and the group collectively makes the decision. Importantly, the model does not prescribe which style is inherently superior but provides a decision tree that guides leaders in selecting the most appropriate style based on situational factors (Tjosvold et al., 1986).

In educational contexts, this model offers a particularly valuable perspective. Schools and preschools are organizations where decisions must balance quality, acceptance, and time constraints, often under conditions of uncertainty. Decisions range from routine administrative matters—such as scheduling or budget allocation—to complex pedagogical and relational issues, such as integrating children with special educational needs, managing conflicts, or adapting curricula. Each type of decision requires a different degree of participation, and the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model provides a systematic framework for determining when unilateral decisions are efficient and when broader consultation is indispensable.

The model is also highly relevant to preschool education, where the stakes of decision-making are particularly high. Directors and teachers must often respond quickly to unplanned events—such as accidents, parental requests, or policy changes—while simultaneously ensuring that decisions are accepted by staff and consistent with the best interests of children. For example, safety-related decisions may demand rapid, centralized action (A1 or A2). In contrast,

pedagogical or extracurricular initiatives may benefit from consultative or group-based approaches (C2 or GII) that foster buy-in and creativity among teachers. The model thus aligns well with the dynamic and relational nature of preschool settings, where both efficiency and legitimacy are critical.

Research in school leadership has underscored the value of such situational flexibility. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) emphasize that transformational leaders adjust their decision-making style according to the problem, ensuring that staff feel included while maintaining efficiency. Similarly, distributed leadership perspectives argue that empowering teachers in decision-making enhances institutional resilience and innovation (Spillane & Camburn, 2006). The Vroom–Yetton–Jago model provides the practical decision rules that translate these leadership ideals into concrete action.

2.4. Job satisfaction and procedural justice

A combination of structural, organizational, and interpersonal factors shapes job satisfaction in education. Research consistently highlights that satisfaction is strongly influenced by perceptions of fairness in institutional processes, opportunities for professional growth, and recognition of contributions (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). In particular, procedural justice—the perception that organizational processes are transparent, fair, and consistently applied—has been shown to correlate strongly with teacher satisfaction and well-being (Colquitt, 2001). When teachers perceive decision-making procedures as fair, they are more likely to accept outcomes even if those outcomes are not individually favorable.

Rousseau et al. (2009) found that procedural justice also moderates the negative effects of low autonomy, suggesting that transparent and inclusive processes can buffer against systemic constraints. In this sense, procedural justice becomes particularly salient in centralized systems, where teachers' substantive autonomy may be limited, but the perceived fairness of processes can help sustain morale. This insight aligns with findings from the Romanian context, where institutional autonomy is constrained. However, teacher satisfaction often depends on the quality of internal processes led by directors and school boards.

2.5. Emotion-based decision-making

Although decision-making is often framed as rational and evidence-based, organizational psychology emphasizes the unavoidable role of emotions in shaping judgments (Gross, 2002). Emotions significantly influence how individuals perceive problems, evaluate alternatives, and commit to implementing solutions. In education, where decisions often involve sensitive

interpersonal interactions with children, parents, and colleagues, the role of emotions is particularly pronounced.

High levels of autonomy are generally associated with more balanced and reflective decision-making, as teachers feel empowered to deliberate and align decisions with their professional values. Conversely, when autonomy is restricted, teachers may experience frustration, stress, or helplessness, leading to more impulsive, emotion-driven decisions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Such tendencies can have significant consequences in preschool settings, where decisions regarding classroom management, child safety, and parental engagement must often be made quickly and with sensitivity. The Vroom–Yetton–Jago model addresses this issue indirectly by emphasizing the importance of matching decision-making styles to situational demands, thereby reducing the likelihood of inappropriate reliance on emotions in contexts where rational deliberation is essential.

2.6. The Romanian context

The Romanian educational system presents a particularly relevant case study for investigating decision-making autonomy. Historically, the system has been characterized by a high degree of centralization, with policies, curricula, and procedures dictated mainly at the national level by the Ministry of Education and enforced locally by inspectorates (Stoica, 2019). Although reforms after 1989 introduced elements of decentralization, these changes have often been more declarative than substantive. Preschool institutions, in particular, remain constrained by strict regulations concerning staffing, curriculum, and resource allocation, leaving limited space for local decision-making (Mitulescu, 2017).

This context generates a paradox. On the one hand, policy discourse emphasizes the importance of autonomy, participation, and local adaptation, in line with European principles of educational governance (Bush, 2020). On the other hand, daily practice often reflects rigid compliance with top-down directives. For preschool institutions, the challenges are compounded by structural inequalities between urban and rural areas, disparities in resources, and the increasing diversity of children’s needs, including the integration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational requirements.

Investigating autonomy in this context is important for at least two reasons. First, it provides empirical evidence of how teachers and managers experience autonomy under conditions of systemic centralization, thereby contributing to international debates on the role of context in shaping autonomy. Second, it enables the adaptation of international models, such as Vroom–Yetton–Jago, to the Romanian context, providing a structured framework for understanding

how decision-making styles can be optimized even within restrictive environments. By examining autonomy alongside leadership, job satisfaction, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making, this study situates Romanian preschool education within a broader theoretical and comparative perspective.

The present study

The present study aimed to investigate the dynamics of decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool education and its associations with job satisfaction, leadership, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making. Drawing on the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model, the study conceptualized autonomy not merely as the individual freedom to act, but as a situated practice shaped by institutional structures and leadership styles. By employing a quantitative, cross-sectional design, the study examined the extent to which autonomy—or its absence—relates to teachers’ and managers’ perceptions of fairness, leadership tendencies, and professional fulfillment.

Specifically, the study tested six hypotheses: (1) whether decision-making autonomy is directly associated with job satisfaction; (2) whether lower autonomy is linked to greater reliance on emotion-based decision-making; (3) whether leadership tendencies are positively related to job satisfaction; (4) whether leadership is associated with both desired autonomy and perceived lack of autonomy; (5) whether autonomy correlates with procedural justice; and (6) whether procedural justice is strongly associated with job satisfaction. By situating these relationships within the Romanian context of systemic centralization, the study sought to provide empirical evidence on how preschool professionals navigate autonomy under constrained institutional conditions, and to identify leverage points for strengthening participatory management.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design with the primary aim of exploring factors associated with decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions. The research design was selected to allow for the simultaneous measurement of multiple constructs—autonomy, leadership, job satisfaction, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making—within a single sample, thereby enabling the testing of associations between these constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A cross-sectional approach was deemed

appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the constraints imposed by the educational context.

3.2 Participants

The final sample consisted of 113 preschool professionals, with an age range between 22 and 62 years ($M = 40.05$, $SD = 9.36$). Participants reported an average of 15.37 years of professional experience ($SD = 10.88$), with a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 42 years of service. The overwhelming majority of respondents were female (95.6%), which reflects the demographic profile of the Romanian preschool workforce.

Regarding professional role, 36 participants (31.9%) reported occupying a managerial position (director or deputy director), while 77 (68.1%) had no formal managerial responsibilities. In terms of institutional affiliation, 107 respondents (94.7%) were employed in public preschools, while only six (5.3%) worked in private institutions. This distribution confirms the dominant role of public preschools in Romania but also indicates the need to interpret results within the constraints of this structural imbalance.

3.3 Measures

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure the relevant constructs. The instrument integrated scales adapted from validated international measures, alongside items specifically developed for the Romanian preschool context. The selection of instruments was guided by three criteria: (a) theoretical relevance to the construct of autonomy and its associated factors; (b) evidence of psychometric robustness in prior studies; and (c) adaptability to the cultural and organizational realities of Romanian preschool education.

Decision-Making Autonomy. Decision-making autonomy was measured using two items assessing perceived autonomy (i.e., *“To what extent do you feel autonomous in making decisions regarding the institution where you work?”*) and desired autonomy (i.e., *“Would you like to have more decision-making autonomy at your workplace?”*). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very much”).

Emotion-Based Decision-Making. The role of emotions in decision-making was measured using a subset of items adapted from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) (Goldberg et al., 2006). The scale included nine items designed to capture the extent to which respondents rely on emotional reactions rather than rational deliberation when making professional decisions. Items covered domains such as emotional reactivity, intuitive judgment, and affect-driven goal setting. Example items included (*“I listen more to my heart than to my mind when making decisions”*) and (*“I make important decisions based on facts, not feelings”*) (reverse-

scored). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .685, which is considered acceptable given the relatively small number of items.

Leadership. Leadership tendencies were assessed using a Romanian adaptation (Iliescu et al., 2015) of the IPIP leadership subscale (Goldberg et al., 2006). This subscale comprises 10 items that measure individuals’ inclination toward leadership behaviors, including initiative, communication, and social influence (example items: “*I take the lead in group situations*” and “*I wait for others to set the tone before I act*” (reverse-scored). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 5 = “strongly agree”). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale in this study was .769, indicating good internal consistency.

Procedural Justice. Perceptions of procedural justice were measured using the Procedural Justice Scale developed by Sweeney and McFarlin (1997). This instrument includes 13 items designed to capture the perceived fairness of organizational procedures, particularly in relation to decision-making, evaluation, and promotion. Items were slightly adapted linguistically to fit the Romanian educational context. Example items included “*The procedures used to evaluate my performance are fair and objective*” and “*I am promptly informed when changes in policies affect me*”. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach’s alpha in the present study was .749, confirming acceptable reliability.

Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using a single-item global assessment, a method validated in organizational psychology as both efficient and robust (Wanous et al., 1997). The item was phrased as: “*How satisfied are you with your current job?*”. Respondents rated their satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “not at all satisfied,” 5 = “very satisfied”). While multi-item scales are often preferred, single-item global measures have demonstrated adequate validity in large-scale educational and organizational surveys.

3.4. Reliability

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of the scales. Results showed acceptable reliability levels: leadership ($\alpha = .769$), procedural justice ($\alpha = .749$), and emotion-based decision-making ($\alpha = .685$). The scale measuring lack of autonomy had a lower coefficient ($\alpha = .576$), which can be attributed to the small number of items (five). While this score is below the conventional .70 threshold, it was deemed sufficient for exploratory purposes. The single-item measure of job satisfaction and the two items assessing autonomy (perceived and desired) were not suitable for reliability analysis.

3.5 Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed both online (via Google Forms) and in paper-and-pencil format, depending on institutional preferences. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality was ensured, with no personally identifying data collected. Ethical guidelines were followed, including the right to withdraw and the exclusion of unnecessary personal data.

4. Results

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to test associations between autonomy, job satisfaction, leadership, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the results between managers and non-managers. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for reliability assessment. A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was applied for all tests.

Relationships between autonomy and job satisfaction

The first hypothesis tested the relationship between decision-making autonomy and job satisfaction. Pearson correlation analysis revealed no significant direct relationship between the two variables ($p > .05$). This result diverges from international literature, where autonomy is frequently associated with higher satisfaction levels. However, additional analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between job satisfaction and perceived quality of the decision-making process ($r = .374, p < .001$). In other words, satisfaction appears to be less associated with autonomy itself and more with how decision-making is conducted within institutions.

Autonomy and emotion-based decision-making

The second hypothesis proposed a negative correlation between autonomy and reliance on emotions in decision-making. Results supported this association indirectly. A significant positive correlation was found between perceived lack of autonomy and emotion-based decision-making ($r = .192, p = .042$). This indicates that respondents who reported lower levels of autonomy were also more likely to rely on emotions rather than rational deliberation in their professional decisions.

Leadership, autonomy, and job satisfaction

The third hypothesis investigated the relationship between leadership and job satisfaction. Pearson correlation analysis confirmed a significant positive association ($r = .366, p < .001$),

suggesting that respondents with stronger leadership tendencies also reported higher work satisfaction.

The fourth hypothesis examined the relationship between leadership and autonomy. Two significant associations were found: a positive correlation between leadership and desired autonomy ($r = .290, p = .002$), and a negative correlation between leadership and lack of autonomy ($r = -.189, p = .045$). These findings suggest that individuals with stronger leadership tendencies both aspire to greater autonomy and perceive themselves as less deprived of it.

Procedural justice, autonomy, and satisfaction

The fifth hypothesis explored the relationship between autonomy and procedural justice. No statistically significant correlation was identified, although a marginal negative association was observed between lack of autonomy and procedural justice ($r = -.171, p = .071$). This result indicates a possible trend in which teachers who perceive less autonomy may also report lower perceptions of fairness in institutional procedures. However, the relationship did not reach the conventional level of significance.

By contrast, the sixth hypothesis revealed a very strong and significant correlation between procedural justice and job satisfaction ($r = .650, p < .001$). This suggests that fairness and transparency in institutional processes are decisive factors in determining the professional satisfaction of preschool staff, potentially more important than autonomy itself.

Comparisons between managers and non-managers

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences between participants with and without managerial responsibilities. Results showed no significant differences ($p > .05$) in perceived autonomy, job satisfaction, or procedural justice between managers and non-managers. Both groups reported similar perceptions regarding these dimensions, suggesting that systemic centralization affects staff at all hierarchical levels. Interestingly, further analysis revealed no significant differences in satisfaction or perceptions of justice between staff in public and private preschools. While private institutions represent a very small portion of the sample, this finding suggests that differences in funding structures may not automatically translate into different experiences of autonomy or fairness.

Demographic influences

Correlation analyses between demographic variables and the primary study constructs provided further insights. Professional experience was positively correlated with perceived autonomy ($r = .260, p = .005$). This result suggests that teachers with more years in the system feel more autonomous, potentially due to increased familiarity with institutional procedures, greater

confidence in decision-making, or stronger informal influence. By contrast, age was not independently correlated with autonomy, satisfaction, or other variables once experience was controlled. Gender comparisons could not be conducted due to the low number of male respondents.

Summary of results

In summary, the results provide a nuanced picture of autonomy in Romanian preschool education. Autonomy per se does not predict job satisfaction; instead, satisfaction is closely tied to the perceived quality and fairness of decision-making processes. Leadership emerges as a central factor, positively linked to both satisfaction and autonomy. A lack of autonomy is associated with a greater reliance on emotion-based decision-making, underscoring the risks of overly restrictive environments. Ultimately, experience plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of autonomy, whereas managerial status does not appear to differentiate staff experiences substantially.

5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the factors associated with decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions, examining its relationship with leadership, job satisfaction, procedural justice, and emotion-based decision-making. The findings offer both expected confirmations of the international literature and some divergences that require further contextual interpretation.

One of the most important findings was the lack of a significant correlation between perceived autonomy and job satisfaction. This stands in contrast to numerous studies that emphasize autonomy as a robust predictor of satisfaction and engagement (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). In contexts such as Finland, where autonomy is deeply embedded in the professional identity of teachers, the link between autonomy and satisfaction is not only well established but often highlighted as a key driver of system-level performance (Sahlberg, 2021). The absence of this relationship in the Romanian sample suggests that autonomy, while formally limited, may not be the most salient dimension for staff well-being in highly centralized systems. Instead, as our results showed, job satisfaction was strongly associated with the perceived quality of decision-making processes, echoing findings from organizational psychology which emphasize the importance of procedural justice in shaping attitudes (Colquitt, 2001; Rousseau et al., 2009).

The centrality of procedural justice to satisfaction confirms prior evidence that fairness and transparency in institutional processes significantly influence staff evaluations of their work environment (Bush, 2020). When teachers perceive procedures as fair—whether in evaluation, promotion, or resource allocation—they are more likely to report higher satisfaction, even if their substantive autonomy remains restricted. This finding aligns with Leithwood and Jantzi's (2006) work on transformational leadership, which underscores the role of leaders in creating climates of trust, fairness, and inclusion. In the Romanian context, where many decisions are externally mandated by inspectorates and ministries (Stoica, 2019), the fairness of local implementation may act as a buffer against systemic rigidity.

Another important result was the positive correlation between leadership tendencies and both job satisfaction and desired autonomy. This finding confirms transformational and distributed leadership theories (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Spillane & Camburn, 2006), which posit that leaders who engage others in decision-making and model participatory behaviors enhance both morale and commitment. In our sample, individuals who scored higher on leadership traits not only expressed a greater desire for autonomy but also perceived themselves as having less autonomy. This suggests that leadership tendencies may empower individuals to seek out and exercise decision-making discretion even within centralized structures. It also reinforces Bush's (2020) argument that leadership is not merely a managerial attribute but a distributed organizational capacity that can be cultivated at all levels.

The observed link between lack of autonomy and reliance on emotion-based decision-making also resonates with the literature on decision-making psychology. Gross (2002) and Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argue that constrained environments, where individuals feel powerless, often increase emotional reactivity and reduce rational, evidence-based decision-making. In the preschool context, where daily decisions often involve sensitive interactions with children and parents, the risk of emotion-driven judgments may have particularly significant implications. This finding suggests that enhancing autonomy is not only a matter of professional dignity but also a safeguard for rational and balanced pedagogical practice.

The absence of significant differences between managers and non-managers in perceived autonomy and satisfaction deserves further reflection. In more decentralized systems, one would expect managers to report greater autonomy, given their responsibility for institutional strategy and operations (Bush & Bell, 2002). The fact that this was not the case in our study may reflect the systemic constraints of Romanian preschool education, where managerial discretion is curtailed by extensive legal and procedural frameworks (Mitulescu, 2017; Răduț,

2008). It also raises questions about the role of school leadership in centralized contexts: rather than functioning as autonomous decision-makers, managers may act primarily as intermediaries between central authorities and local staff. This dynamic contrasts sharply with the leadership role described in contexts such as Finland, where principals are key agents of innovation and adaptation (Sahlberg, 2021).

By situating these findings within the Vroom–Yetton–Jago model of decision-making (Vroom & Jago, 1978), further insights can be gained. The model emphasizes the contingency of decision-making styles, arguing that effective leaders adjust the degree of group participation depending on the importance of decision quality, acceptance, and available information (Tjosvold et al., 1986). In our context, the findings suggest that Romanian preschool institutions operate under conditions where the leader’s discretion to adjust participatory levels is itself limited by central directives. As a result, decision-making processes may remain formalistic rather than adaptive, undermining the very flexibility that the model seeks to promote. This may explain why procedural justice, rather than autonomy per se, emerged as the more salient factor for satisfaction.

Taken together, the results highlight a paradox. On the one hand, autonomy is recognized as a cornerstone of practical education (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). On the other hand, in centralized contexts such as Romania, perceptions of fairness and transparency seem to play a stronger role in shaping satisfaction. This suggests that autonomy cannot be examined in isolation from systemic structures. Where formal autonomy is absent, teachers may shift their expectations toward the fairness of the processes that govern them. Conversely, in systems with embedded autonomy, teachers may evaluate satisfaction more directly in relation to their substantive freedom.

These findings contribute to the comparative literature on teacher autonomy and professional status. Teaching is often characterized by high responsibility but limited authority, a condition particularly evident in the Romanian preschool system. The results of this study empirically support this assertion, showing that while educators bear the responsibility for children’s development, their ability to influence institutional decisions remains constrained. However, the positive associations observed between leadership, desired autonomy, and satisfaction suggest pathways for improvement. By cultivating participatory leadership and enhancing procedural justice, institutions may strengthen both teacher motivation and organizational capacity, even within systemic constraints.

Limitations

While this study may offer important insights into the factors influencing decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample size of 113 participants was sufficient for exploratory statistical analyses, it does not capture the full diversity of Romanian preschool institutions. Urban settings were more strongly represented than rural ones, and institutions with more stable funding may differ considerably from under-resourced preschools in how autonomy is enacted and perceived. The absence of random sampling raises the possibility of selection bias, which limits the extent to which these results can be applied to the entire preschool system.

The gender composition of the sample also represents a limitation. With 95.6% of respondents being female, the sample accurately reflects the gender distribution of the Romanian preschool workforce; however, it restricts opportunities for comparative analysis. Male educators and managers may bring different perspectives on leadership, procedural justice, or autonomy, perspectives that remain underexplored in this study.

Another limitation concerns the measurement of key constructs. Autonomy and job satisfaction were assessed using very brief scales—two items for autonomy and a single global item for job satisfaction. Although single-item measures of satisfaction are well-established in organizational research, they cannot fully capture the multidimensional nature of the construct. Similarly, the two-item operationalization of autonomy may underestimate the complexity of decision-making freedom in educational contexts, where autonomy involves multiple dimensions, including curricular, pedagogical, administrative, and financial aspects.

The exclusive reliance on self-report questionnaires may raise additional concerns. Data collected through self-reports are vulnerable to common method bias, social desirability effects, and subjective interpretation of items. Teachers may have under- or over-reported their autonomy or satisfaction depending on their relationships with management, recent experiences, or perceptions of anonymity. These factors may have influenced responses in ways that the study could not control.

Further, the cross-sectional design of the research limits the conclusions that can be drawn. Correlations between leadership, autonomy, procedural justice, and satisfaction were identified, but causal relationships cannot be established. It remains unclear whether leadership behaviors enhance autonomy and satisfaction or whether teachers who feel satisfied are more

likely to perceive leadership in a positive light. Longitudinal research would be required to examine how these relationships develop over time.

Also, some contextual factors must also be taken into account. The findings are rooted in the Romanian preschool system, which is characterized by a high degree of centralization and bureaucratic oversight. While the results offer valuable insights for similarly structured systems, they may not be directly generalizable to countries with long-standing traditions of institutional autonomy, such as Finland or Denmark. The influence of national educational legislation, inspection practices, and community involvement likely shaped participants' perceptions of autonomy in ways that differ from other contexts.

Next, the treatment of managerial status also deserves mention. The study included both managers and non-managers, yet no significant differences were identified between these groups. This may reflect systemic centralization, but it may also indicate limitations in the binary categorization used. Future research could differentiate between types of managerial roles, such as directors versus deputy directors, or explore informal leadership exercised by teachers without formal management responsibilities. Finally, reliability estimates for some of the shorter scales, particularly autonomy and emotion-based decision-making, were below the ideal threshold of .70. Although acceptable for exploratory purposes, these values suggest the need for more robust and contextually adapted instruments in future research.

Future studies should expand the sample to include rural–urban comparisons, longitudinal analyses of autonomy development, and investigations into the impact of autonomy on children's learning outcomes. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnographic observation, can complement quantitative findings by capturing the nuances of decision-making practices.

Practical implications

The findings of the present study have several important implications for policy, practice, and professional development in the field of early childhood education. One of the clearest outcomes is the strong link between job satisfaction and the perceived quality of decision-making processes rather than autonomy itself. This suggests that efforts to improve satisfaction among preschool staff in Romania should not only focus on granting formal autonomy but should also prioritize the development of transparent, inclusive, and well-communicated decision-making procedures. Ensuring that teachers understand how decisions are made, who

is consulted, and on what basis choices are justified can strengthen trust in institutional leadership and foster a sense of shared responsibility.

The positive association between leadership and both job satisfaction and desired autonomy highlights the role of leadership development as a cornerstone of educational reform. Training programs for preschool directors and managers should emphasize participatory and transformational leadership styles, equipping leaders with the skills to involve teachers in meaningful decision-making, distribute responsibilities fairly, and foster a collaborative organizational culture. Leadership training should not be confined to managers alone; teachers with strong leadership tendencies could be supported through mentorship and professional development initiatives to become informal leaders within their institutions. Such distributed leadership structures could enhance innovation, motivation, and organizational resilience.

The findings related to procedural justice reinforce the importance of fairness and equity in shaping staff perceptions and well-being. Policy initiatives should focus on clarifying and standardizing procedures for evaluation, promotion, and resource allocation across preschool institutions. At the institutional level, managers can enhance procedural justice by introducing regular feedback mechanisms, involving staff in discussions about policy changes, and clearly articulating the criteria used in performance evaluation. Transparent communication not only strengthens legitimacy but also reduces perceptions of arbitrariness and favoritism that often undermine morale in centralized systems.

The correlation between lack of autonomy and reliance on emotion-based decision-making suggests that overly restrictive environments may compromise the rationality and effectiveness of professional judgments. This has direct implications for classroom practice, as teachers who feel disempowered may rely more heavily on reactive, emotionally driven decisions rather than evidence-based or pedagogically grounded choices. By providing teachers with greater space to exercise professional discretion—particularly in areas directly related to pedagogy and child development—institutions can foster more thoughtful and effective educational practices. Policies that devolve decision-making authority to teachers in matters of curriculum adaptation, classroom management, and extracurricular activity design could therefore directly enhance the quality of educational provision.

The absence of significant differences between managers and non-managers in perceptions of autonomy and satisfaction underscores the systemic nature of constraints in Romanian preschool education. Policy reforms at the national level are needed to reduce excessive bureaucratic control and expand institutional discretion. Initiatives such as revising the

regulatory framework of inspectorates, granting schools greater authority over budgetary decisions, and enabling institutions to design locally responsive curricula would provide meaningful opportunities for both managers and staff to exercise autonomy. Without such systemic reforms, institutional efforts at participatory management may be undermined by the rigidity of central mandates.

Finally, the results of this study suggest important directions for teacher professional development. Beyond technical training, professional development should integrate components related to decision-making, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers who are better equipped with these skills will be more capable of engaging constructively in participatory management processes. Moreover, equipping teachers with competencies in reflective and evidence-based decision-making may help counterbalance tendencies toward emotion-driven judgments when autonomy is perceived as limited. Professional development tailored to these needs can therefore serve as a direct bridge between autonomy research and practical improvements in early childhood education.

Taken together, these implications suggest that enhancing decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions is not merely about granting abstract freedoms but rather about fostering institutional cultures of participation, fairness, and transparency. Reform must operate simultaneously at the policy, institutional, and professional development levels, ensuring that leadership practices and teacher capacities match structural changes. In this way, the findings of this study can inform concrete strategies for strengthening the quality and sustainability of early childhood education.

Conclusions

This study provides evidence on the factors associated with decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions. The findings highlight several key points: (1) Job satisfaction is more strongly linked to the perceived quality of decision-making than to autonomy per se; (2) Lack of autonomy increases reliance on emotion-based decision-making; (3) Leadership is positively associated with both job satisfaction and autonomy, suggesting the need for participatory leadership development; (4) Procedural justice may predict job satisfaction, underscoring the role of fairness and transparency; (5) Managerial roles do not inherently guarantee higher autonomy or satisfaction.

These findings contribute to the understanding of decision-making autonomy in Romanian preschool institutions by revealing that autonomy itself is not the strongest predictor of job

satisfaction. Instead, teachers' and managers' satisfaction is more closely tied to the quality and fairness of decision-making processes. Leadership emerged as a pivotal factor, enhancing both satisfaction and the aspiration for greater autonomy, while perceptions of unfair or opaque procedures were linked to diminished satisfaction. The results also showed that when autonomy is constrained, educators are more prone to rely on emotion-driven decision-making, which may undermine reflective and evidence-based practice.

Taken together, the results underscore the importance of participatory leadership and procedural justice as key pathways for enhancing professional satisfaction and organizational effectiveness, even in highly centralized systems. For policymakers and practitioners, the results suggest that reforms should move beyond declarative autonomy and instead focus on fostering transparent, fair, and collaborative decision-making cultures. Future research should build on these findings by employing longitudinal and qualitative approaches, exploring rural–urban differences, and examining how teacher autonomy affects child outcomes. By addressing these directions, scholarship can further inform policies that strengthen autonomy as both a structural and cultural resource in early childhood education.

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