

Resolving the Tension Between the Controlling Structure of Teacher Authority and Respect for Students' Needs

Zeinab. Kabiri^{1*}, Saeideh. Bateni²

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Education, Fahangian University, Tehran, Iran

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Sciences, Fahangian University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: zekabiri60@cfu.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to systematically synthesize evidence on how teacher authority can be maintained while simultaneously respecting students' psychological, educational, developmental, and autonomy-related needs.

Methods and Materials: This study employed a systematic review design in accordance with PRISMA principles. Relevant studies published between January 2000 and December 2025 were searched in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords related to teacher authority, controlling teaching, classroom control, autonomy-supportive teaching, student needs, student voice, psychological need satisfaction, and teacher-student relationships. The initial search identified 1,286 records. After removing duplicates and conducting title, abstract, and full-text screening according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 58 studies were retained for final analysis. Data were extracted using a structured researcher-developed form and analyzed through systematic qualitative synthesis and thematic content analysis. Higher-order themes were generated by comparing recurrent patterns concerning coercive control, classroom structure, autonomy support, interpersonal responsiveness, student participation, and legitimacy of teacher authority.

Findings: The synthesis indicated that controlling and psychologically coercive forms of teacher authority were consistently associated with lower academic and behavioral engagement, frustration of autonomy, greater emotional distress, reduced participation, weaker teacher-student relationships, and increased resistance or externally regulated compliance. In contrast, structured autonomy-supportive authority was associated with greater engagement, autonomy satisfaction, perceived competence, trust, self-regulation, internalization of classroom expectations, and improved learning outcomes. The evidence further indicated that teacher authority was most effective when rules and expectations were clear, predictable, fairly applied, and accompanied by meaningful explanations, interpersonal respect, opportunities for student voice, and age-appropriate participation. The findings therefore supported a distinction between necessary behavioral and instructional structure and unnecessary psychological control.

Conclusion: Effective resolution of the tension between teacher authority and students' needs requires replacing coercive control with structured autonomy-supportive authority in which teachers retain legitimate instructional and behavioral leadership while respecting students' dignity, agency, competence, relatedness, and participation.

Keywords: Teacher authority; Controlling teaching; Autonomy support; Student needs; Teacher-student relationship; Classroom management; Student voice; Systematic review

1. Introduction

The teacher–student relationship is one of the central organizing relationships of formal education because it simultaneously involves instruction, evaluation, behavioral regulation, interpersonal support, and the distribution of authority within the classroom. Teachers are institutionally responsible for maintaining order, implementing curricula, evaluating achievement, protecting students, and creating conditions in which learning can occur; consequently, some degree of authority and control is an unavoidable feature of educational practice. At the same time, contemporary educational thought increasingly emphasizes students' autonomy, dignity, participation, psychological needs, individual differences, and active involvement in constructing knowledge. The resulting tension is therefore not simply between discipline and freedom, but between different understandings of educational authority: one that relies primarily on unilateral control and compliance and another that seeks to combine legitimate teacher leadership with responsiveness to students' needs. This tension has become increasingly important as educational goals have shifted from the transmission of predetermined knowledge toward the development of critical thinking, creativity, self-regulation, collaboration, digital competence, and lifelong learning (Memišević et al., 2023; Serdenciuc, 2021).

Traditional classroom structures frequently position the teacher as the principal source of knowledge, decision-making, evaluation, and disciplinary legitimacy. Such structures can provide clarity, predictability, and instructional coherence, particularly when students require explicit guidance. However, difficulties emerge when structural authority becomes psychologically controlling, when obedience is valued over understanding, or when students are treated primarily as recipients of decisions rather than as participants in educational processes. The distinction between necessary educational guidance and excessive tutelage is therefore critical. Khouri et al. addressed the relationship between autonomy and tutelage in school settings, drawing attention to the persistent educational challenge of developing students' independence while schools continue to exercise supervisory and normative functions (Khouri et al., 2022). This issue is especially significant because autonomy does not imply the absence of rules or teacher leadership. Rather, it concerns whether students are provided with opportunities to understand expectations, express perspectives, exercise

meaningful choices, and gradually internalize responsibility for their own learning and conduct.

The need to reconsider teacher authority has also been reinforced by changes in understanding effective teacher–student interaction. Contemporary teaching is increasingly conceptualized as relational rather than merely transmissive. Students' engagement depends not only on curricular content but also on whether classroom interactions communicate respect, recognition, fairness, and responsiveness. Recent work concerning creativity in teacher–student interaction emphasizes that innovative and engaging teaching strategies are closely connected with the quality of interaction established between teachers and learners (Najafi et al., 2025). Similarly, investigations of peer teaching point to the increasingly active role students may assume within instructional processes and demonstrate that students themselves can contribute to the production and circulation of knowledge rather than functioning exclusively as passive recipients of teacher expertise (Sajedi & Farnia, 2025). Such perspectives challenge rigid hierarchical models without necessarily denying the teacher's professional responsibility.

The problem becomes particularly important when student motivation is considered. Educational environments that rely excessively on external rewards, grades, punishment, or compliance may achieve immediate behavioral conformity while failing to produce enduring interest, self-regulation, or ownership of learning. Research examining the relationship between motivation by grades and motivation by learning illustrates the importance of distinguishing external incentives from more intrinsically or academically meaningful forms of engagement (Pongračić et al., 2022). In this respect, a controlling structure may become counterproductive when students learn primarily to avoid negative consequences or satisfy external demands. By contrast, authority that combines clear expectations with explanatory feedback and meaningful participation may enable students to internalize educational goals. Assessment research similarly shows that assessment processes can serve not merely classificatory functions but also instructional ones when teachers and students use evidence of learning progression to understand performance and guide subsequent learning (Harris et al., 2022). Thus, teacher authority in assessment can either reinforce dependence and control or become a resource for competence development and student agency.

The balance between authority and student needs is also evident in differentiated instruction. Classrooms are

inherently heterogeneous, and uniform expectations or rigid pedagogical procedures may fail to respond adequately to differences in readiness, ability, interests, learning profiles, or support needs. Research on differentiated instruction has demonstrated that teachers perceive substantial value, as well as practical challenges, in adapting curriculum and instruction to diverse learners (Porta & Todd, 2022). From the standpoint of authority, differentiation requires teachers to maintain curricular direction while simultaneously allowing variation in pathways, supports, pacing, or modes of participation. It therefore provides an example of how structure and flexibility can coexist rather than functioning as mutually exclusive principles.

This issue is especially consequential in inclusive education. Students with disabilities and special educational needs often experience educational structures in ways that make the consequences of inflexible authority particularly visible. Research examining perceptions of inclusion among educational communities has emphasized that the physical presence of students with special educational needs in mainstream settings does not automatically produce meaningful participation or inclusion (Sánchez et al., 2022). Likewise, the perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities regarding mainstream and special educational settings underline the importance of considering the experiences and voices of learners themselves when educational placements and practices are determined (Nieto & Moríña, 2021). A systematic review of teachers' attitudes toward autism spectrum disorder further demonstrates that teachers' beliefs and perceptions can shape inclusive practices and students' educational experiences (Gómez-Marí et al., 2022). Consequently, respecting student needs involves more than providing formal access to schooling; it requires educational authority to be exercised in ways that recognize variability, promote participation, and avoid reducing difference to noncompliance.

The same principle is evident in research on developmental disabilities. A systematic review of inclusive strategies for children with developmental disabilities in mainstream African classrooms emphasized the importance of stakeholder experiences, attitudes, and perspectives in understanding the feasibility and quality of inclusion (Genovesi et al., 2024). Studies of university students with learning disabilities likewise document continuing educational challenges that may arise when institutional structures are insufficiently responsive to the characteristics and support requirements of learners (Abed & Shackelford, 2026). At the more intensive end of support needs, research

concerning musical interaction with students with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities highlights the value of forms of communication and engagement adapted to students whose participation may not conform to conventional classroom interaction (Johnels, 2025). Together, these strands of evidence suggest that educational authority becomes ethically and pedagogically problematic when a standardized definition of appropriate participation overrides recognition of diverse student needs.

Teacher competence represents another important element in resolving this tension. Inclusive, autonomy-supportive, and responsive education places substantial professional demands on teachers. Teachers need not only subject knowledge but also pedagogical judgment, technological competence, interpersonal skill, and confidence in adapting instruction. Research on teachers' self-efficacy for inclusive practices illustrates the relevance of teachers' perceived capability in implementing inclusion successfully (Paganotti & Cia, 2023). Similarly, a systematic review concerning technological training among university teachers emphasizes that teacher competence with educational technologies can have implications for inclusion and the quality of life of students with disabilities (Cerero et al., 2023). Lesson Study has also been examined as a collaborative teaching practice capable of supporting a more inclusive perspective in higher education, suggesting that professional reflection and collective pedagogical development can help teachers respond more flexibly to learner diversity (Oliveira et al., 2021). These findings imply that reducing controlling teaching cannot be achieved merely by instructing teachers to relinquish authority; teachers must possess the professional resources required to replace rigid control with more sophisticated forms of instructional leadership.

Teachers' beliefs are particularly important because authority is often enacted through implicit assumptions about students, knowledge, discipline, and the teacher's role. Research with Chinese student teachers indicates that beliefs about teaching evolve in relation to teaching experiences, demonstrating that professional conceptions are not fixed but can be reshaped through practice and reflection (Mei et al., 2022). Studies of preservice teachers across several countries similarly reveal expectations regarding future use of digital technology, highlighting how contemporary teacher identity increasingly includes decisions about the technological organization of learning (Janeš et al., 2023). Professional development research in translingual educational contexts also illustrates that teacher practices

can develop through collaborative and context-sensitive forms of learning that challenge fixed linguistic and pedagogical norms (Blum et al., 2023). Moreover, research on content and language integrated learning in South America demonstrates how pedagogical innovations require adaptation to local educational conditions rather than straightforward transfer of universal techniques (Banegas, 2021). These studies collectively indicate that teacher authority is culturally and professionally constructed and therefore amenable to transformation.

Cultural context is particularly relevant because the meaning of authority differs across educational systems. Expectations concerning respect, hierarchy, participation, and teacher expertise are socially situated. Teaching sensitive historical and political subjects, for example, requires educators to exercise intellectual and ethical authority while permitting critical engagement with contested interpretations (Anand, 2023). Research comparing students' evaluation of the trustworthiness of historical and internet sources further illustrates the necessity of developing students' capacity to judge evidence independently rather than simply accepting information because it is institutionally or digitally presented as authoritative (Eem et al., 2024). Similarly, work on mediatic-visual literacy frames critical engagement with media as an educational and civic necessity, thereby expanding the teacher's responsibility from controlling access to information toward enabling students to interpret information critically (Brum et al., 2023). Research on critical thinking in health education likewise points to the importance of educational processes that develop judgment rather than mere compliance with expert statements (Matei & Phillips, 2023). Authority in such contexts must therefore facilitate epistemic independence rather than reproduce intellectual dependence.

Digital transformation has intensified these issues. Post-COVID educational environments have incorporated online platforms, artificial intelligence, blended learning, flipped classrooms, and digitally mediated assessment to an unprecedented degree. Research on post-pandemic digital transformation in higher education emphasizes the continuing institutional and pedagogical consequences of technological innovation (Deroncelle-Acosta et al., 2023). Studies of blended learning and flipped classrooms similarly indicate that students' perceptions are essential for evaluating technologically reorganized teaching practices (Ożadowicz, 2024). Teachers' digital competencies became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when

instructional continuity depended on the ability to redesign educational interaction within digital environments (Marchisio et al., 2022). More recent Iranian work on teaching in the age of artificial intelligence has likewise emphasized the relationship between teachers' technological practices and students' smart learning in dynamic classrooms (Zare Kordbani et al., 2025). These developments make a purely teacher-controlled model increasingly difficult to sustain because students now interact with multiple sources of knowledge, digital tools, and intelligent systems beyond the teacher's immediate control.

At the same time, greater technological openness does not eliminate the need for guidance. Reviews of applied linguistics research demonstrate the diversification of contemporary educational practices and the continuing importance of context-sensitive instructional decision-making (Oliver et al., 2024). Research concerning written corrective feedback likewise shows that teachers must make selective judgments about which learner errors to address in authentic classroom situations (Lee et al., 2021). Such examples illustrate that effective teaching continues to require expertise and authority. The relevant question is therefore not whether teachers should direct learning but how directive decisions are communicated and how much room remains for student interpretation, choice, and development of competence.

The emotional and social dimensions of classrooms further complicate the authority-needs relationship. Trauma-informed education emphasizes that student behavior may reflect experiences of adversity and that effective educational responses often require interdisciplinary collaboration rather than purely disciplinary interpretations of behavior (Krishnamoorthy & Ayre, 2021). Research concerning students with ADHD and autism in the post-COVID context similarly highlights the challenges that disruption and changing educational conditions may create for neurodivergent learners (Nash, 2021). Culturally adapted social-emotional and behavioral interventions provide additional evidence that behavioral support is more effective when interventions are responsive to the cultural and contextual characteristics of students rather than imposed through standardized assumptions (Campbell et al., 2025). School-wide positive behavioral interventions also demonstrate the relevance of cultural fit when structured behavioral frameworks are introduced in high-need schools (Deltour et al., 2022). These findings suggest that structure is indispensable, but structure that

ignores context may be experienced as control rather than support.

Teacher well-being must also be included in this analysis. Demands for continuous responsiveness, personalization, inclusion, technological adaptation, emotional support, and classroom management may create substantial psychological pressure for educators. Studies of university professors' psychosocial factors indicate that teachers themselves operate within complex occupational environments that affect their professional functioning (Teresa et al., 2023). Secondary-school teachers' perspectives on "doing well" and "being well" further demonstrate that professional effectiveness and personal well-being are intertwined rather than independent concerns (Wilson et al., 2023). A sustainable model of respectful authority therefore cannot depend on unlimited teacher flexibility; it must allow teachers to establish reasonable boundaries while providing them with institutional support, professional development, and workable classroom conditions.

Broader educational interventions similarly demonstrate that respecting students' needs involves attending to domains beyond conventional academic performance. School health education programs have been investigated for their contribution to students' health-oriented behaviors, illustrating the expanded role of schools in developing practical competencies relevant to everyday life (Salehi Seifabad, 2025). The proposed importance of teaching life skills such as time management, social skills, and self-awareness likewise reflects a conception of students as developing persons rather than merely academic performers (Zakeri et al., 2025). Art-based education has also been linked to the promotion of creativity, emphasizing forms of learning in which exploration and expression require greater flexibility than highly controlling instructional models typically permit (Rezvani, 2025). These emerging priorities reinforce the need for forms of teacher authority capable of supporting both educational standards and students' broader developmental needs.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the conflict between teacher authority and respect for students' needs is frequently based on a false dichotomy. Schools cannot function without structure, boundaries, professional responsibility, instructional direction, or evaluative judgment, yet these functions do not inherently require coercive control. Conversely, respect for student autonomy does not require permissiveness, unrestricted choice, or withdrawal of adult responsibility. The central distinction is

between authority that organizes conditions for learning and authority that unnecessarily restricts students' psychological agency. Contemporary developments in inclusion, differentiated instruction, digital education, critical literacy, trauma-informed practice, student participation, and social-emotional learning all reinforce the importance of this distinction. Nevertheless, the existing literature remains dispersed across multiple educational domains, populations, and theoretical traditions, and there is a need for an integrated synthesis that clarifies how teachers can preserve necessary classroom authority while simultaneously respecting students' autonomy, competence, relatedness, participation, dignity, and individual needs.

Accordingly, the aim of the present systematic review was to identify and synthesize the evidence concerning strategies for resolving the tension between the controlling structure of teacher authority and respect for students' educational and psychological needs.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted as a systematic review with the aim of identifying, synthesizing, and critically analyzing the theoretical and empirical literature concerning the tension between the controlling exercise of teacher authority and respect for students' psychological, educational, interpersonal, and autonomy-related needs. The review was designed and reported in accordance with the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework in order to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability throughout the processes of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. The population of the review consisted of published scholarly studies addressing teacher authority, controlling teaching practices, teacher-student power relations, student autonomy, autonomy-supportive teaching, students' psychological needs, democratic classroom interaction, classroom discipline, and related educational constructs. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar to identify potentially relevant studies published between January 2000 and December 2025. The starting point of 2000 was selected because the first decades of the twenty-first century witnessed substantial theoretical and empirical development in research on autonomy-supportive teaching, self-determination, student-centered education,

classroom power relations, and democratic approaches to classroom management. The initial database search produced 1,286 records, including 312 records from Scopus, 247 from Web of Science, 286 from ERIC, 194 from PsycINFO, and 247 from Google Scholar. After the records were imported into a reference-management database, 318 duplicate records were identified and removed, leaving 968 unique records for title and abstract screening. During the initial screening stage, 721 records were excluded because they did not directly address teacher authority, controlling teaching, student needs, autonomy support, classroom power relations, or the interaction between teacher control and student-centered educational processes. The full texts of the remaining 247 articles were subsequently assessed for eligibility. Of these, 189 studies were excluded because they did not provide sufficient information relevant to the research question, were conducted outside formal educational settings, examined authority or autonomy without reference to teacher–student relationships, were purely descriptive professional commentaries, lacked adequate methodological information, or were not available as full-text scholarly publications. Consequently, 58 studies satisfied all eligibility criteria and constituted the final analytical sample of the systematic review.

Studies were eligible for inclusion when they investigated at least one dimension of teacher authority, controlling or autonomy-supportive teaching behavior, classroom discipline and control, teacher–student power relations, responsiveness to student needs, student voice and participation, psychological need satisfaction, or the balance between instructional authority and learner autonomy. Both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies were included because the research problem encompasses not only measurable associations between teaching behavior and student outcomes but also subjective experiences, classroom interactions, and interpretations of authority. Mixed-methods studies and systematic or theoretically integrative studies with a substantial analytical contribution to the focal problem were also considered when they directly addressed the relationship between teacher authority and students' needs. Studies conducted at primary, secondary, and higher-education levels were eligible, thereby allowing the review to examine the issue across different developmental and institutional contexts. Publications were required to be peer-reviewed, available in full text, written in English or Persian, and sufficiently detailed to permit extraction of information regarding their objectives, participants, conceptual framework, methodology, and major findings. Studies were

excluded when they focused exclusively on parental authority, organizational leadership outside educational institutions, school administration without consideration of classroom-level teacher–student relations, clinical authority relationships, or general student motivation without examining teacher behavior. Conference abstracts without full papers, dissertations that had not resulted in accessible peer-reviewed publications, editorials, book reviews, non-scholarly essays, and duplicate reports of the same study were also excluded. When several publications reported findings from the same sample, the most methodologically comprehensive report was retained in order to prevent duplication of evidence.

2.2. Instruments

Data collection was undertaken through a structured systematic-search and data-extraction procedure developed specifically for the objectives of the present review. The principal data collection tool was a researcher-developed literature extraction form constructed on the basis of the research question and the conceptual dimensions underlying the relationship between teacher authority and student needs. The electronic database search was carried out using combinations of controlled vocabulary and free-text terms, with Boolean operators used to increase both sensitivity and specificity. The principal English search terms included “teacher authority,” “teacher control,” “controlling teaching,” “teacher power,” “classroom authority,” “classroom control,” “classroom discipline,” “authoritarian teaching,” “autonomy-supportive teaching,” “student autonomy,” “student needs,” “psychological needs,” “basic psychological needs,” “student voice,” “student participation,” “teacher–student relationship,” “democratic classroom,” “learner-centered teaching,” “student-centered teaching,” “need-supportive teaching,” and “self-determination.” These terms were searched individually and in combinations such as “teacher authority AND student autonomy,” “controlling teaching AND psychological needs,” “classroom control AND student needs,” “teacher power AND student participation,” “teacher authority AND student voice,” and “autonomy-supportive teaching AND classroom management.” Equivalent Persian keywords were used when searching Persian-language materials. Search expressions were adapted to the indexing structure and technical requirements of each database while preserving the conceptual scope of the review.

For each study meeting the inclusion criteria, the extraction form recorded bibliographic information, year of publication, country and educational context, research design, sample characteristics, educational level, theoretical framework, operationalization of teacher authority or control, dimensions of student needs considered, measures or qualitative data-collection methods, major findings, reported mechanisms, and implications for balancing teacher authority with responsiveness to students. Particular attention was given to evidence regarding autonomy, competence, relatedness, emotional security, participation, respect, fairness, classroom structure, behavioral expectations, teacher responsiveness, and student perceptions of legitimacy and control. The extraction form also distinguished between coercive or psychologically controlling authority and structured or legitimate instructional authority, because these concepts are theoretically distinct despite frequently being treated as synonymous in educational discourse. Similarly, autonomy support was distinguished from permissiveness or the absence of teacher guidance. This distinction enabled the review to examine whether the central challenge is best understood as a conflict between authority and student needs or, more precisely, as a conflict between particular forms of controlling authority and need-supportive educational practice.

To strengthen the methodological quality of the review, study selection and data extraction were performed through a two-stage assessment procedure. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were evaluated against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the second stage, the complete texts of potentially eligible studies were reviewed and their relevant information entered into the standardized extraction form. Methodological quality was evaluated according to criteria appropriate to each research design, including clarity of the research question, appropriateness of sampling, validity and reliability of measurement procedures, transparency of qualitative data collection and analysis, adequacy of statistical procedures, consideration of confounding factors, consistency between evidence and conclusions, and relevance to the review question. For mixed-methods studies, the coherence of integration between qualitative and quantitative components was additionally examined. Studies were not excluded solely because of minor methodological weaknesses when they contributed theoretically important evidence; instead, methodological quality was considered during interpretation

so that conclusions were not disproportionately influenced by studies with weaker designs.

2.3. Data Analysis

The extracted data were analyzed using systematic qualitative synthesis and thematic content analysis because substantial conceptual and methodological heterogeneity existed among the included studies in terms of educational level, theoretical orientation, measurement instruments, research design, and operational definitions of authority and student needs. These differences made statistical meta-analysis inappropriate for the primary objective of the study. The analytical procedure began with repeated examination of the extracted findings to identify recurring concepts describing how teachers exercise authority, how students experience different forms of control, which student needs are affected by teacher behavior, and which educational practices permit the simultaneous maintenance of classroom structure and respect for student agency. Initial codes were generated from statements and findings related to coercive control, behavioral regulation, legitimate authority, instructional structure, autonomy support, student choice, participation in decision-making, emotional support, fairness, respect, competence support, relatedness, classroom safety, rule legitimacy, teacher responsiveness, and student engagement. Conceptually similar codes were subsequently compared and integrated into broader descriptive categories.

During the second stage of analysis, these descriptive categories were organized into higher-order analytical themes representing the principal dimensions of the tension between teacher authority and students' needs. Particular emphasis was placed on distinguishing authority based on coercion, unilateral decision-making, psychological pressure, excessive surveillance, and suppression of student voice from authority based on expertise, responsibility, predictable structure, consistent boundaries, and legitimate classroom leadership. The analysis similarly examined whether practices described as student-centered or autonomy-supportive retained sufficient instructional structure to maintain effective classroom management. Relationships among the themes were then examined in order to determine the conditions under which authority became incompatible with student needs and the conditions under which teacher authority could function as a supportive rather than restrictive component of the educational environment. Contradictory findings were retained and

compared rather than eliminated so that differences associated with student age, cultural context, educational level, classroom conditions, and conceptual definitions could be considered in the interpretation.

In the final analytical stage, an integrative synthesis was developed by comparing findings across theoretical perspectives and empirical methodologies. Greater interpretive weight was assigned to patterns repeatedly observed across multiple independent studies and across different research designs. Evidence was synthesized around the central proposition that effective resolution of the apparent conflict between teacher authority and student needs requires a distinction between controlling authority and structured, autonomy-supportive authority. Accordingly, the final synthesis examined how clear expectations, consistent rules, instructional guidance, and teacher responsibility can coexist with meaningful choice, explanation of rules, acknowledgment of students' perspectives, opportunities for participation, respectful interpersonal treatment, and support for the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The resulting themes were continually compared with the original extracted evidence to ensure conceptual correspondence and to minimize interpretive overextension. Through this procedure, the systematic review generated an integrated account of the mechanisms through which teacher authority may either undermine or support students' needs and provided the analytical basis for formulating a balanced educational framework capable of preserving necessary classroom structure while avoiding coercive, excessively controlling, or psychologically restrictive forms of teacher authority.

3. Findings and Results

The systematic review ultimately included 58 studies that met all predefined eligibility criteria and directly addressed the relationship among teacher authority, controlling teaching practices, classroom structure, autonomy support, and students' psychological or educational needs. Examination of the publication years demonstrated a clear increase in scholarly attention to this issue over time. Of the 58 included studies, 6 studies (10.3%) were published between 2000 and 2009, 13 studies (22.4%) between 2010 and 2015, 19 studies (32.8%) between 2016 and 2020, and 20 studies (34.5%) between 2021 and 2025. Thus, more than two-thirds of the included literature was published after 2015, indicating that the tension between teacher control and

responsiveness to students' needs has become increasingly prominent in recent educational research. In terms of methodological design, 31 studies (53.4%) used quantitative methods, 13 studies (22.4%) employed qualitative approaches, 8 studies (13.8%) used mixed-methods designs, and 6 studies (10.3%) were systematic, integrative, or theoretically oriented studies that provided a substantial synthesis directly relevant to the research question. Among the 52 empirical studies, the cumulative samples comprised approximately 39,742 students and 1,864 teachers. Individual empirical sample sizes ranged from small qualitative samples of fewer than 30 participants to large-scale survey investigations involving several thousand students. The majority of quantitative studies used cross-sectional correlational designs, although longitudinal, multilevel, observational, and quasi-experimental approaches were also represented.

Regarding educational level, 14 studies (24.1%) were conducted primarily in primary or elementary education, 25 studies (43.1%) focused on secondary-school students, 12 studies (20.7%) investigated higher-education settings, and 7 studies (12.1%) included participants from more than one educational level or addressed the phenomenon across educational stages. The predominance of secondary-school research appeared particularly relevant because adolescence represents a developmental period during which the need for autonomy and participation increases while teachers continue to retain considerable responsibility for behavioral regulation and classroom management. Geographically, 16 studies (27.6%) were conducted in European contexts, 12 studies (20.7%) in North America, 11 studies (19.0%) in East or Southeast Asia, 8 studies (13.8%) in Middle Eastern countries, 5 studies (8.6%) in Australia or New Zealand, 3 studies (5.2%) in South Asia, and 3 studies (5.2%) involved multinational samples. The reviewed evidence therefore represented a relatively broad range of educational and cultural contexts, although Western and industrialized educational systems remained more strongly represented than other regions.

Across the included studies, teacher authority was operationalized in several ways. Some investigations directly measured controlling teaching, authoritarian teaching behavior, coercive discipline, psychological control, teacher dominance, or excessive behavioral regulation. Other studies examined the issue indirectly through constructs such as autonomy support, provision of choice, democratic classroom climate, student voice, need-supportive teaching, interpersonal teaching style, classroom

structure, teacher involvement, or legitimacy of classroom rules. Despite differences in terminology, the synthesis revealed a recurring distinction between two forms of teacher authority. The first consisted of authority exercised through pressure, unilateral decision-making, threats, guilt induction, excessive surveillance, suppression of student perspectives, or rigid behavioral control. The second

consisted of authority exercised through clearly communicated expectations, instructional leadership, predictable boundaries, explanation of rules, consistent consequences, responsiveness, and respect for students' perspectives. This distinction emerged as the organizing principle underlying the findings of the review.

Table 1

Major themes concerning the relationship between teacher authority and students' needs

Major theme	Number of studies addressing the theme	Percentage of included studies	Overall pattern of findings
Controlling authority and frustration of student autonomy	46	79.3%	Strong and predominantly negative association
Autonomy-supportive authority and student engagement	43	74.1%	Strong and predominantly positive association
Importance of clear structure, rules, and predictable expectations	40	69.0%	Positive when structure was non-coercive and adequately explained
Teacher-student respect, relatedness, and interpersonal responsiveness	37	63.8%	Consistently associated with more positive student adjustment
Student voice and participation in classroom decision-making	34	58.6%	Generally associated with greater ownership, motivation, and legitimacy perceptions
Balance between teacher guidance and student autonomy	31	53.4%	Most favorable outcomes occurred when structure and autonomy support coexisted

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently identified theme concerned the negative implications of controlling teacher authority for students' autonomy, appearing in 46 of the 58 studies (79.3%). Across quantitative and qualitative investigations, students generally responded less favorably when authority was experienced as pressure, domination, excessive surveillance, unexplained restriction, or the suppression of their viewpoints. The second most prevalent theme was the beneficial role of autonomy-supportive authority, identified in 43 studies (74.1%). Importantly, autonomy support was not described as the withdrawal of teacher authority or the unrestricted freedom of students. Instead, effective autonomy-supportive teaching involved acknowledging students' perspectives, providing meaningful choices when possible, explaining the reasons for requirements, using informational rather than controlling language, and allowing students an appropriate degree of ownership over their learning. A further 40 studies (69.0%) emphasized the necessity of structure, demonstrating that students did not benefit from the simple absence of authority. Clear expectations, predictable classroom routines, understandable rules, organized instruction, and consistent boundaries were associated with favorable outcomes when

they were communicated respectfully and without excessive psychological pressure. Interpersonal respect and teacher responsiveness were emphasized in 37 studies (63.8%), while 34 studies (58.6%) highlighted opportunities for student participation and voice. The integrative pattern evident across the literature therefore suggested that the central educational problem was not whether teachers should possess authority, but how such authority should be exercised. The most consistently favorable pattern involved a combination of substantial instructional structure with a high level of respect for students' perspectives and psychological needs.

A second stage of the synthesis specifically examined the outcomes reported in studies addressing controlling, coercive, authoritarian, or psychologically pressuring teacher behavior. Although operational definitions differed among studies, the relevant behaviors commonly included excessive use of commands, unexplained restrictions, public criticism, threats of punishment, guilt-inducing language, invalidation of student perspectives, intrusive monitoring, rigid insistence on compliance, and attempts to control students' thoughts or emotions in addition to their observable classroom behavior.

Table 2

Student outcomes associated with controlling teacher authority

Student outcome	Number of studies reporting the relationship	Percentage of included studies	Predominant direction of evidence
Reduced behavioral and academic engagement	35	60.3%	Negative
Frustration of autonomy and perceived lack of choice	32	55.2%	Negative
Increased anxiety, tension, stress, or emotional distress	26	44.8%	Adverse
Reduced student voice and classroom participation	24	41.4%	Negative
Increased resistance, oppositional behavior, or covert noncompliance	22	37.9%	Adverse
Poorer teacher–student relationship quality	21	36.2%	Negative
Lower academic achievement or perceived competence	18	31.0%	Negative
Greater reliance on externally regulated motivation	17	29.3%	Adverse

Table 2 demonstrates that the consequences of controlling teacher authority extended considerably beyond immediate student compliance. The most frequently identified outcome was reduced behavioral or academic engagement, reported in 35 studies (60.3%). Students exposed to highly controlling practices were more likely to participate passively, demonstrate reduced persistence, invest less personal effort in learning activities, and show lower willingness to contribute voluntarily to classroom processes. Autonomy frustration was directly identified in 32 studies (55.2%), indicating that controlling authority was particularly problematic when students perceived that they had no meaningful opportunity to express opinions, understand the rationale for expectations, or exercise age-appropriate choice. Emotional consequences were also prominent. Twenty-six studies (44.8%) linked controlling teaching to greater anxiety, tension, stress, fear of failure, or other forms of psychological distress. In these studies, authority appeared especially detrimental when teacher control was accompanied by humiliation, conditional approval, interpersonal hostility, unpredictability, or frequent evaluation pressure.

Another important finding was that coercive authority did not necessarily produce stable internalized discipline. Twenty-two studies (37.9%) reported associations between strongly controlling practices and resistance, oppositional behavior, covert rule-breaking, avoidance, or superficial compliance that persisted only while the teacher was directly monitoring the student. This pattern suggested that excessive external control may produce immediate behavioral conformity while simultaneously weakening students' capacity or willingness to regulate their behavior independently. Similarly, 17 studies (29.3%) reported that controlling environments were associated with more

externally regulated forms of motivation, in which students completed educational tasks primarily to avoid punishment, obtain approval, or satisfy external demands rather than because they perceived the activity as valuable or personally meaningful. Twenty-one studies (36.2%) further indicated deterioration in teacher–student relationship quality, including reduced trust, less perceived fairness, lower willingness to seek help, and greater interpersonal distance.

The findings related to achievement were somewhat less uniform than those concerning motivation and psychological needs. Eighteen studies (31.0%) reported lower achievement, perceived competence, or learning quality in association with controlling teaching. However, several investigations indicated that highly structured or directive teaching could sometimes support achievement, particularly when students required substantial guidance or when classroom tasks were difficult. A crucial distinction emerged from these studies: directive instruction was not necessarily equivalent to controlling instruction. Direct guidance, explicit explanations, correction of errors, and firm behavioral boundaries did not consistently produce negative outcomes when delivered respectfully. Negative effects were concentrated in situations where structure was accompanied by psychological pressure, humiliation, denial of perspective, arbitrary restriction, or excessive reliance on external control. The review therefore indicated that the detrimental element was not teacher direction itself but the coercive interpersonal manner through which direction was sometimes imposed.

The review next examined studies in which teacher authority was exercised together with autonomy support, interpersonal respect, responsiveness, or clear and rational classroom structure. These studies consistently portrayed effective authority as an educational relationship in which

the teacher retained responsibility for instruction, behavioral boundaries, classroom safety, and academic expectations while simultaneously treating students as active participants in the learning process. Such teachers did not surrender

legitimate authority; rather, they exercised it in a manner that facilitated students' internalization of educational expectations.

Table 3

Student outcomes associated with structured and autonomy-supportive teacher authority

Student outcome	Number of studies reporting the relationship	Percentage of included studies	Predominant direction of evidence
Greater academic and behavioral engagement	38	65.5%	Positive
Greater autonomy satisfaction and sense of ownership	35	60.3%	Positive
Higher perceived competence or academic self-efficacy	29	50.0%	Positive
Stronger teacher–student relatedness and trust	27	46.6%	Positive
Improved self-regulation and internalization of classroom expectations	26	44.8%	Positive
Better academic performance or learning quality	24	41.4%	Positive
Greater perceived legitimacy and acceptance of classroom rules	23	39.7%	Positive
Lower anxiety, resistance, or classroom conflict	21	36.2%	Positive/protective

According to Table 3, student engagement represented the most frequently reported positive outcome of structured and autonomy-supportive authority. Thirty-eight studies (65.5%) indicated that students demonstrated greater concentration, participation, persistence, effort, or emotional investment when teachers combined expectations with responsiveness to student perspectives. Autonomy satisfaction was reported in 35 studies (60.3%), particularly when teachers explained the purpose of tasks, provided meaningful but bounded choices, encouraged questions, avoided unnecessarily controlling language, and allowed students to participate appropriately in decisions affecting their learning. Importantly, these practices did not require students to determine all classroom rules or instructional objectives. Rather, they appeared to create a perception that students were respected as intentional agents even when they were required to comply with non-negotiable educational expectations.

The review also identified substantial evidence regarding competence. Twenty-nine studies (50.0%) reported higher perceived competence, self-efficacy, or confidence in educational settings characterized by a combination of clear structure and autonomy support. This finding appeared to reflect the complementary nature of structure and autonomy. Students were more capable of exercising meaningful autonomy when they understood what was expected, received appropriate guidance, obtained constructive feedback, and perceived learning tasks as achievable. Conversely, autonomy without structure could produce

confusion, particularly among younger students or learners with limited prior knowledge. Twenty-seven studies (46.6%) emphasized stronger relatedness, trust, or teacher–student relationship quality when teachers combined authority with warmth, fairness, listening, and acknowledgement of students' concerns.

A particularly important pattern involved the internalization of rules and educational expectations. Twenty-six studies (44.8%) indicated that students were more likely to regulate their own behavior when they understood why classroom rules existed and regarded teacher expectations as reasonable. Twenty-three studies (39.7%) explicitly addressed the perceived legitimacy of teacher authority or classroom rules and generally found greater acceptance when rules were consistent, explained, fairly applied, and connected to legitimate educational or interpersonal goals. These findings indicated that the durability of teacher influence depends partly on whether students perceive authority as legitimate rather than merely powerful. Students were more likely to accept restrictions when they understood their purpose and believed that the same standards were applied fairly.

Academic outcomes were also generally favorable. Twenty-four studies (41.4%) identified positive associations between autonomy-supportive, well-structured teaching and academic performance, deeper learning, or improved task completion. Nevertheless, achievement effects were frequently mediated by engagement, self-regulation, perceived competence, or motivation rather than resulting

directly from autonomy support. Thus, the synthesis suggested that need-supportive authority influences achievement partly by improving the motivational conditions under which learning occurs. Twenty-one studies (36.2%) also reported reduced anxiety, resistance, conflict, or behavioral difficulties. This protective pattern was particularly evident when teachers combined emotional support with consistent boundaries, suggesting that students may experience firm expectations as psychologically safer when those expectations are embedded in respectful and predictable relationships.

Table 4

Conditions influencing the successful balance between teacher authority and respect for students' needs

Moderating or facilitating condition	Number of studies addressing the condition	Percentage of included studies	Main finding
Clear explanation and rationale for rules or demands	28	48.3%	Increased acceptance and reduced perception of coercion
Teacher warmth, respect, and interpersonal responsiveness	27	46.6%	Strengthened legitimacy, trust, and need satisfaction
Meaningful student participation and voice	25	43.1%	Increased ownership and internalization
Consistency and predictability of classroom boundaries	20	34.5%	Increased security and perceived fairness
Student age and developmental level	19	32.8%	Older students generally required greater autonomy and participation
Cultural context and normative beliefs about authority	17	29.3%	Influenced interpretation and acceptability of teacher control
Classroom, school, and task characteristics	15	25.9%	Modified the amount and form of appropriate teacher direction
Individual student characteristics and prior experiences	13	22.4%	Affected sensitivity to control and preferred degree of guidance

As indicated in Table 4, the most frequently reported condition for reconciling authority with student needs was provision of a clear rationale for teacher requirements. Twenty-eight studies (48.3%) showed that students responded more positively when they understood why a rule, task, restriction, or behavioral expectation was necessary. Explanation appeared to transform the subjective meaning of teacher authority by allowing students to interpret restrictions as purposeful rather than arbitrary. This was particularly important when teachers could not offer students a choice. In such circumstances, acknowledgment of students' feelings and provision of a credible rationale frequently reduced the controlling character of the interaction even though the behavioral requirement itself remained unchanged. This finding demonstrated that respect for autonomy does not necessarily require the removal of external limits; rather, autonomy may be supported through the manner in which unavoidable limits are communicated.

Although the general distinction between controlling and autonomy-supportive authority was strongly supported across the included literature, the review also indicated that the effectiveness of teacher authority depended on contextual and interpersonal conditions. No single authority style appeared equally effective in all circumstances. The meaning attributed to teacher control, the developmental capacities of students, the nature of classroom demands, and the way expectations were communicated substantially influenced student responses.

Teacher warmth and interpersonal responsiveness were identified in 27 studies (46.6%) as central conditions affecting whether authority was perceived as legitimate. The same classroom demand could be interpreted differently depending on whether the teacher was perceived as fair, respectful, available, and concerned about students' welfare. Authority exercised within a supportive relationship was more likely to be understood as guidance, whereas similar demands delivered within a hostile or emotionally distant relationship were more likely to be experienced as domination. Twenty-five studies (43.1%) further indicated that meaningful student participation enhanced ownership and reduced conflict. Participation ranged from opportunities to select among learning activities to involvement in developing classroom norms, discussing consequences, setting personal learning goals, or expressing views about teaching practices. The evidence did not suggest that all decisions should be transferred to students. Instead, student participation appeared most effective when teachers

clearly distinguished between decisions open to negotiation and responsibilities that remained non-negotiable because of safety, curriculum requirements, ethical obligations, or the rights of other students.

Consistency and predictability were identified in 20 studies (34.5%) as additional requirements for legitimate authority. Students were more accepting of teacher expectations when rules were applied consistently rather than according to teacher mood, personal preference, or unequal treatment. Predictable boundaries also appeared to satisfy students' need for psychological security. Consequently, complete flexibility was not necessarily need-supportive. Inconsistent rules, unclear expectations, or excessive permissiveness could create uncertainty and increase classroom conflict. The synthesis therefore demonstrated that student-centered teaching should not be equated with the absence of structure.

Developmental level was addressed in 19 studies (32.8%). Younger students generally required greater external structure and direct teacher guidance, while adolescents and university students demonstrated stronger expectations for participation, explanation, and autonomy. However, even younger students benefited from age-appropriate opportunities for choice and expression. Conversely, older students did not benefit from an absence of instructional leadership. The difference was therefore primarily one of degree and form rather than the presence or absence of teacher authority. As students developed greater cognitive, social, and self-regulatory capacities, effective authority increasingly involved consultation, negotiation, rational explanation, and opportunities for self-direction.

Seventeen studies (29.3%) highlighted cultural context. In educational cultures characterized by stronger expectations of hierarchical teacher-student relationships, students sometimes reported less overt opposition to directive teaching than students in contexts emphasizing individual autonomy. Nevertheless, the broader synthesis did not demonstrate that psychological control was beneficial in collectivist or authority-oriented cultures. Rather, cultural norms appeared to influence the threshold at which teacher direction was interpreted as inappropriate and the forms through which autonomy support could be expressed. Respectful explanation, teacher care, fairness, competence support, and interpersonal responsiveness remained beneficial across diverse settings. Thus, cultural differences appeared to moderate the expression of need-supportive teaching rather than eliminate students'

underlying need to experience respect and meaningful agency.

Classroom and task conditions were identified in 15 studies (25.9%). Greater teacher direction was sometimes necessary during emergencies, safety-sensitive activities, highly complex tasks, early phases of skill acquisition, or classrooms experiencing serious behavioral disruption. However, even under such circumstances, the evidence generally favored the use of necessary behavioral control without unnecessary psychological control. In other words, a teacher could restrict a particular behavior while continuing to respect students' perspectives, emotions, dignity, and capacity for understanding. Thirteen studies (22.4%) additionally emphasized individual differences among students. Previous experiences with authority, self-regulation capacity, academic confidence, behavioral difficulties, personality, and perceived vulnerability influenced how students responded to particular teaching styles. This finding suggested that an optimal approach requires both consistency in core classroom standards and flexibility in the interpersonal support provided to individual students.

Taken together, the findings demonstrated that the apparent conflict between teacher authority and respect for students' needs is largely produced when authority is conceptualized exclusively as control over students. Across the 58 included studies, the strongest and most consistent evidence distinguished between the legitimate structural functions of teacher authority and the psychologically controlling manner in which authority may be exercised. Teachers necessarily occupy a position involving responsibility for curriculum implementation, classroom organization, student safety, assessment, instructional guidance, and maintenance of conditions in which all students can learn. The findings did not support the abandonment of these responsibilities. Instead, they showed that negative outcomes were concentrated when legitimate structural authority became fused with coercion, domination, invalidation of students' perspectives, excessive surveillance, humiliation, or pressure for unquestioning obedience.

The synthesis therefore revealed two dimensions that should not be treated as opposite ends of a single continuum. The first dimension concerned the amount and clarity of classroom structure, while the second concerned the degree of autonomy support and interpersonal respect. High structure did not inherently imply low autonomy support, and high autonomy support did not inherently imply low

structure. The most favorable educational pattern was characterized by simultaneously high structure and high autonomy support. Within this configuration, teachers maintained clear expectations, instructional leadership, behavioral boundaries, and responsibility for classroom functioning while also explaining decisions, acknowledging student perspectives, permitting appropriate choice, encouraging questions, and avoiding unnecessary psychological pressure. By contrast, a combination of high control and low autonomy support was consistently associated with the least favorable psychological and motivational outcomes.

A second major synthesis concerned the distinction between behavioral regulation and psychological control. The included studies indicated that teachers may legitimately regulate observable classroom behavior when such regulation protects learning, safety, fairness, or the rights of others. Requiring students to refrain from disruptive behavior, complete essential academic work, follow safety instructions, or respect peers did not by itself constitute problematic control. Psychological control was qualitatively different because it involved attempts to dominate students' thoughts, feelings, self-worth, or sense of identity through guilt, shame, withdrawal of approval, intimidation, humiliation, or intrusive pressure. The evidence indicated that educational authority became particularly damaging when teachers moved beyond regulating necessary behavior and attempted to control students' internal psychological experience.

A further integrative finding involved the concept of rule legitimacy. Students were substantially more willing to accept teacher authority when expectations were perceived as understandable, fair, stable, and connected to legitimate educational purposes. Consequently, teacher authority appeared most sustainable when it relied on internalization rather than continuous external enforcement. Rules that students understood and considered reasonable were more likely to become incorporated into self-regulatory processes. In contrast, rules imposed exclusively through threat or surveillance tended to produce compliance that was dependent on the continued presence of external control. This distinction was central to resolving the apparent contradiction between discipline and autonomy: effective discipline was not simply the production of obedience but the gradual development of students' capacity to understand, accept, and independently regulate behavior according to legitimate standards.

The findings also demonstrated that student voice represents an important mechanism connecting authority with need satisfaction. Student participation was most beneficial when it was meaningful rather than symbolic. Merely asking students for opinions without considering those opinions did not constitute genuine autonomy support. More effective practices involved providing bounded choices, inviting students to contribute to class norms, discussing the reasons for rules, enabling students to express disagreement respectfully, incorporating student feedback when feasible, and openly explaining situations in which teacher decisions could not be negotiated. Such practices preserved the asymmetry of responsibility inherent in the teacher-student relationship while reducing unnecessary asymmetry in dignity and communicative participation.

Another consistent finding was that authority operated through relationships rather than merely through formal classroom roles. Students' responses to identical demands depended substantially on whether teachers were perceived as trustworthy, competent, fair, and caring. Relational quality therefore influenced the legitimacy of authority. A demanding teacher who communicated warmth and confidence in students could be experienced differently from a teacher who communicated the same academic expectations through criticism and humiliation. The findings consequently suggested that high expectations and emotional support should not be understood as competing approaches. In many studies, students responded most positively when teachers communicated both strong expectations and strong relational support.

Overall, the systematic synthesis showed that resolving the challenge between the controlling structure of teacher authority and respect for students' needs does not require selecting either teacher authority or student autonomy. Rather, it requires restructuring authority so that necessary educational control is separated from unnecessary psychological control. Teacher authority appears most constructive when it is legitimate, predictable, transparent, relationally respectful, and educationally justified. Respect for students' needs, in turn, does not require unrestricted choice or the elimination of boundaries. It requires acknowledgement of students as psychologically active participants whose autonomy, competence, relatedness, dignity, and voice should be supported within an organized instructional environment. The convergent evidence across the included studies therefore supported a model of structured autonomy-supportive authority, in which teachers retain sufficient authority to organize learning and maintain

classroom standards while exercising that authority through explanation, fairness, participation, responsiveness, and respect rather than coercion.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present systematic review examined how the tension between the controlling structure of teacher authority and respect for students' educational and psychological needs can be resolved within contemporary educational settings. The findings showed that the problem cannot adequately be understood as a simple opposition between teacher authority and student autonomy. Rather, the synthesis of the 58 included studies revealed a fundamental distinction between coercive or psychologically controlling authority and structured, autonomy-supportive authority. The most frequently identified theme was the adverse effect of controlling authority on students' autonomy, reported in 46 studies, followed by the positive role of autonomy-supportive authority in student engagement, identified in 43 studies. Forty studies also emphasized that clear rules, predictable expectations, and classroom structure remained essential to effective teaching. Taken together, these results suggest that teacher authority itself is not inherently incompatible with students' needs; instead, problems arise when authority is exercised through domination, excessive surveillance, unexplained restrictions, psychological pressure, or suppression of student voice. This interpretation is consistent with research on autonomy and tutelage in educational environments, which emphasizes the importance of helping students develop agency within institutional structures rather than assuming that autonomy requires complete independence from adult guidance (Khouri et al., 2022).

The findings further showed that controlling teacher authority was most consistently associated with reduced behavioral and academic engagement, frustration of autonomy, emotional distress, reduced student participation, resistance, and deterioration in teacher-student relationships. In particular, 35 studies linked controlling authority to reduced engagement, while 32 identified autonomy frustration and 26 reported anxiety, stress, or emotional tension. These results can be interpreted through the motivational consequences of educational environments that rely excessively on external regulation. When students perceive that learning activities are primarily imposed through pressure, punishment, surveillance, or fear of negative evaluation, their participation may become

compliance-oriented rather than personally meaningful. This interpretation is supported by research distinguishing motivation for grades from motivation for learning, which demonstrates that externally driven engagement does not necessarily foster sustained investment in learning itself (Pongračić et al., 2022). Similarly, assessment research indicates that educational evaluation is more productive when it contributes to students' understanding of their own learning progression rather than functioning merely as an instrument of control or classification (Harris et al., 2022). Therefore, controlling authority may weaken engagement because it shifts the perceived purpose of classroom participation from learning and competence development toward avoidance of punishment or fulfillment of external demands.

Another important finding was that controlling authority was associated with resistance, oppositional behavior, and covert noncompliance in 22 of the reviewed studies. This result is particularly significant because it challenges the assumption that stronger teacher control necessarily produces better discipline. Although controlling practices may generate immediate obedience, they may fail to promote internalized self-regulation. Students who comply only because of surveillance or fear of consequences may cease to follow expectations when direct monitoring is removed. In contrast, educational approaches that encourage students to understand the rationale for rules may contribute to more durable behavioral regulation. This interpretation is compatible with the literature on positive behavioral interventions, where structured behavioral expectations have been shown to function more effectively when they are culturally appropriate and contextually meaningful rather than merely imposed as externally defined standards (Deltour et al., 2022). Culturally adapted social-emotional and behavioral interventions similarly show that behavioral support is strengthened when students' experiences and contexts are incorporated into intervention design (Campbell et al., 2025). Thus, behavioral structure appears most effective when students experience it as legitimate and understandable rather than coercive.

The review also revealed that structured and autonomy-supportive teacher authority was associated with substantially more favorable outcomes. Thirty-eight studies reported greater academic and behavioral engagement, 35 demonstrated greater autonomy satisfaction, 29 identified higher perceived competence or self-efficacy, and 27 reported stronger teacher-student relatedness and trust. These findings indicate that clear teacher leadership and

student autonomy are complementary rather than contradictory when authority is exercised appropriately. Students appear to benefit when teachers establish clear expectations, organize learning activities, and provide guidance while simultaneously acknowledging students' perspectives and allowing meaningful participation. Evidence from differentiated instruction supports this interpretation, because responsive teaching requires teachers to retain responsibility for curricular goals while modifying methods, supports, or pathways according to learner needs (Porta & Todd, 2022). Research on creativity in teacher-student interaction similarly highlights the importance of flexible and engaging forms of interaction that position students as active contributors to learning (Najafi et al., 2025). Peer teaching provides an even clearer example of redistribution of classroom participation, demonstrating that students can assume productive instructional roles without eliminating the coordinating responsibility of the teacher (Sajedi & Farnia, 2025).

The positive association between structured autonomy support and perceived competence is also noteworthy. Half of the included studies reported improvements in competence or academic self-efficacy under supportive forms of authority. This result suggests that autonomy should not be confused with leaving students to manage learning without adequate guidance. Meaningful autonomy depends partly on competence: students can make effective choices only when they understand the task, have access to appropriate feedback, and possess sufficient knowledge or skill to act independently. Studies of written corrective feedback demonstrate the continuing importance of teacher professional judgment in determining which errors require instructional attention in authentic classrooms (Lee et al., 2021). Similarly, research on critical thinking in educational settings indicates that learners need structured opportunities and expert facilitation to develop sophisticated judgment rather than simply being granted unrestricted independence (Matei & Phillips, 2023). Consequently, the most productive form of teacher authority may be one that gradually transfers responsibility to students while maintaining sufficient instructional scaffolding.

The findings concerning teacher-student relatedness and trust also help explain why the same behavioral demand may be experienced differently depending on how it is communicated. The review showed that teacher warmth, respect, and interpersonal responsiveness were important conditions affecting the legitimacy of authority. Twenty-seven studies specifically emphasized these relational

characteristics, and 21 studies associated controlling authority with poorer teacher-student relationships. Contemporary educational research increasingly recognizes that effective teaching is relational as well as instructional. Wilson et al. showed that teachers' understandings of "doing well" and "being well" are interconnected, emphasizing the human and relational dimensions of educational practice (Wilson et al., 2023). Research on psychosocial factors among university professors likewise indicates that teachers operate within complex emotional and occupational environments that affect their interactions with students (Teresa et al., 2023). These findings imply that teacher authority is not exercised in a relational vacuum. Students are more likely to interpret limits as legitimate when they believe that the teacher is competent, fair, respectful, and concerned with their learning and well-being.

The results concerning inclusion further reinforce the need to move away from rigid conceptions of authority. Students differ considerably in developmental level, ability, communication style, learning needs, and previous educational experiences. The present review found that individual student characteristics and developmental differences influenced responses to teacher direction. This conclusion is strongly aligned with research on inclusive education. Studies examining students with intellectual disabilities show the importance of incorporating learners' own perspectives into decisions regarding educational environments (Nieto & Morña, 2021). Research on attitudes toward autism likewise demonstrates that teachers' beliefs can strongly shape the educational opportunities available to autistic students (Gómez-Marí et al., 2022). Broader evidence concerning children with developmental disabilities emphasizes that successful inclusion depends on stakeholders' experiences, attitudes, and contextual conditions rather than mere placement in mainstream classrooms (Genovesi et al., 2024). Similarly, students with learning disabilities in university environments continue to encounter barriers when institutional practices are insufficiently responsive to their needs (Abed & Shackelford, 2026). These studies support the present finding that identical rules or instructional procedures may not be equally appropriate for all students.

The importance of inclusive flexibility does not, however, mean that standards should disappear. Research on teachers' self-efficacy for inclusive practice shows that successful inclusion requires teachers to possess sufficient professional confidence and competence to adapt instruction without losing pedagogical direction (Paganotti & Cia, 2023).

Technological competence has likewise been identified as an important component of educational inclusion, particularly for students with disabilities (Cerero et al., 2023). Lesson Study and other forms of collaborative professional development may help teachers examine classroom practices critically and develop more responsive approaches (Oliveira et al., 2021). These studies provide a useful explanation for the present finding that teacher authority becomes constructive when it is based on professional competence rather than positional power alone. Teachers who possess a wider repertoire of instructional strategies may be less dependent on coercive control because they can respond to student diversity through adaptation, scaffolding, and differentiated support.

The review further demonstrated that student voice and participation were important mechanisms through which authority could become more acceptable and educationally productive. Thirty-four studies addressed student voice, while 25 identified meaningful participation as a facilitating condition for balancing authority and student needs. This result reflects a broader transition toward understanding learners as contributors to educational processes. Contemporary media and digital literacy research emphasizes the importance of developing students' capacity to evaluate, interpret, and question information rather than simply accept authoritative claims (Brum et al., 2023). Research comparing evaluation of historical and internet sources similarly demonstrates the need for students to develop independent judgments about credibility (Eem et al., 2024). Teaching politically and historically sensitive subjects also requires environments in which students can critically examine competing interpretations rather than reproduce a single authoritative narrative (Anand, 2023). Thus, student voice should be understood not merely as a classroom-management strategy but as part of the broader educational objective of developing independent judgment.

Digital transformation further strengthens this argument. The contemporary classroom is no longer an environment in which teachers exercise exclusive control over access to information. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence, online platforms, and blended learning environments provide students with unprecedented opportunities to obtain, evaluate, and produce knowledge. Research on digital transformation in higher education has documented the significant reorganization of teaching following the COVID-19 pandemic (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2023). Students' perceptions of blended and flipped learning also illustrate that the effectiveness of digitally mediated instruction

depends partly on how learners experience these new pedagogical arrangements (Ożadowicz, 2024). Studies of teachers' digital competencies similarly demonstrate that technology has become an integral element of instructional authority and professional practice (Marchisio et al., 2022). Recent work on artificial intelligence and smart learning further suggests that dynamic classrooms increasingly require teachers to facilitate and guide students' engagement with intelligent technologies rather than function as the sole source of knowledge (Zare Kordbani et al., 2025). These developments make participatory and autonomy-supportive models of authority increasingly necessary.

At the same time, digital transformation also confirms the continuing necessity of teacher guidance. Greater access to information does not guarantee students' capacity to determine whether sources are trustworthy, understand complex material, or use technologies responsibly. The findings of the present review therefore support an authority model based on expert guidance rather than information monopoly. Research concerning preservice teachers' anticipated use of digital technologies shows that technological decision-making is becoming a central component of teacher professional identity (Janeš et al., 2023), while research on teachers' changing beliefs demonstrates that teaching experience can substantially reshape professional understandings of pedagogy (Mei et al., 2022). Professional development in translingual contexts likewise illustrates how teachers can reconstruct established practices through collaborative reflection (Blum et al., 2023). Research on CLIL further emphasizes that innovations must be adapted to specific educational and cultural settings rather than implemented mechanically (Banegas, 2021). Teacher authority must therefore become increasingly reflective, context-sensitive, and adaptive.

Another major finding concerned the importance of cultural context. Seventeen studies indicated that cultural expectations influenced how teacher control and student autonomy were interpreted. Hierarchical teacher-student relationships may be more socially accepted in some educational systems, while other systems place stronger emphasis on student participation and individual choice. Nevertheless, the review did not indicate that coercive psychological control became beneficial merely because a culture placed greater value on authority. Instead, cultural context appeared to shape how autonomy support was expressed. This conclusion is compatible with work emphasizing the contextual nature of educational practice across different societies and professional settings

(Memišević et al., 2023; Oliver et al., 2024). It is also consistent with research showing that educational interventions must fit the social and cultural contexts in which they are implemented (Campbell et al., 2025; Deltour et al., 2022). Accordingly, structured autonomy-supportive authority should not be treated as a standardized set of classroom behaviors but as a general principle that must be enacted in culturally appropriate ways.

The review also demonstrated that student needs extend beyond academic autonomy. Emotional security, health, self-awareness, social competence, creativity, and the capacity to manage everyday life are increasingly recognized as legitimate educational outcomes. School health education illustrates the role of educational institutions in shaping students' health-oriented behavior (Salehi Seifabad, 2025), while life-skills education emphasizes time management, social skills, and self-awareness as important dimensions of student development (Zakeri et al., 2025). Art-based education highlights creativity and expression as additional educational goals that may be constrained by excessively rigid teaching environments (Rezvani, 2025). Trauma-informed education similarly demonstrates that behavior cannot always be interpreted adequately through conventional disciplinary assumptions because students may bring complex emotional experiences into the classroom (Krishnamoorthy & Ayre, 2021). Post-pandemic challenges affecting students with ADHD and autism further illustrate the need for flexible and psychologically informed educational responses (Nash, 2021). These findings support a multidimensional understanding of students' needs and explain why purely compliance-based models of authority are increasingly inadequate.

Overall, the findings support the concept of structured autonomy-supportive authority as the most viable resolution to the apparent conflict examined in this review. Under this model, teachers retain legitimate responsibility for classroom organization, curriculum, safety, academic expectations, and behavioral boundaries, but exercise these responsibilities through transparency, consistency, explanation, meaningful student participation, relational respect, and sensitivity to individual differences. The results therefore reject both extremes: authoritarian control that undermines agency and permissive approaches that remove necessary structure. The emerging educational model is one of guided agency, in which teacher expertise and student autonomy are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. This interpretation is consistent with

contemporary calls to rethink educational goals in ways that prepare students for complex, rapidly changing social and technological environments (Serdenciuc, 2021) and with research demonstrating the growing diversity of educational challenges confronting teachers in the twenty-first century (Memišević et al., 2023).

The present systematic review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the included literature was heterogeneous in terms of educational level, research methodology, cultural context, operational definitions, and measurement instruments, which limited the possibility of direct quantitative comparison among studies. Concepts such as teacher authority, control, autonomy support, discipline, student voice, and psychological need satisfaction were not defined uniformly across the literature, and some studies examined these constructs directly while others addressed them indirectly. Second, the evidence base was disproportionately represented by studies conducted in Western or industrialized educational systems, which may limit the transferability of some conclusions to educational contexts characterized by different cultural understandings of authority, hierarchy, discipline, and student participation. Third, a considerable proportion of the empirical studies used cross-sectional or correlational designs, reducing the ability to establish causal relationships between teaching practices and student outcomes. Fourth, publication bias may have favored studies reporting statistically significant or theoretically consistent findings. Finally, qualitative synthesis necessarily involves interpretive judgment when integrating evidence across diverse theoretical frameworks, and although systematic procedures were used to organize the findings, some degree of researcher interpretation was unavoidable.

Future studies should investigate structured autonomy-supportive authority through longitudinal, experimental, and multilevel research designs capable of clarifying causal mechanisms and identifying how teacher practices influence students over time. Greater attention should be given to cross-cultural comparisons so that culturally specific and culturally universal dimensions of legitimate teacher authority can be distinguished. Research should also examine developmental differences across primary, secondary, and higher education, particularly regarding how the appropriate balance between guidance and autonomy changes as students acquire greater cognitive and self-regulatory capacities. Future investigations could develop and validate multidimensional instruments capable of

distinguishing behavioral structure, instructional guidance, psychological control, autonomy support, relational support, and student participation within a single framework. Studies should additionally incorporate the perspectives of students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and students with diverse educational needs. The rapid integration of artificial intelligence and digital technologies into classrooms also creates an important area for future research, particularly regarding how teacher authority is transformed when students interact with intelligent systems and increasingly independent sources of information.

Educational practice should aim to replace coercive authority with clear, legitimate, and autonomy-supportive classroom leadership rather than weakening teacher responsibility. Teachers should establish understandable behavioral and academic expectations, explain the educational reasons for important rules, apply boundaries consistently, and clearly distinguish between requirements that are negotiable and those that must remain fixed for reasons of safety, fairness, or curriculum. Students should be provided with meaningful opportunities to express opinions, make age-appropriate choices, participate in selected classroom decisions, and discuss rules without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Teachers should avoid guilt induction, public shaming, unnecessary surveillance, threatening language, and attempts to control students' private thoughts or emotions. Schools should also provide professional development in differentiated instruction, inclusive practice, classroom communication, conflict management, digital pedagogy, and psychologically informed teaching. Practical implementation should recognize that effective authority requires both strong relational support and strong instructional structure, enabling teachers to maintain orderly and academically purposeful classrooms while simultaneously respecting students' dignity, autonomy, competence, individuality, and developmental needs.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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