Perspectives

Does School Autonomy Lead to Improved Student Outcomes?

The international and national trend for schools to engage in an autonomous structure continues to grow. It is suggested that school autonomy provides principals, school communities and teachers with the opportunity to progress their schools independently of bureaucratic involvement. The key to the success of school autonomy is the improvement in student outcomes.

In this edition of Perspectives, Associate Professor Scott Eacott, Dean Finlay and Christine Cawsey AM provide their perspective on the question, "Does school autonomy lead to improved student outcomes?"

Dr Scott Eacott
Office of Educational Leadership, School of Education at the University of New South Wales

Improving student outcomes: Is the answer 'school autonomy'?

The performance of schools, and in particular students, is being held back by bureaucratic structures. This is a commonly held belief, and one to which almost everyone has a personal experience to support. The contemporary policy solution – although one with a rich history – is 'school autonomy'. Give schools, or more specifically principals, greater powers and they will overcome the constraints of bureaucratic systems and student outcomes will improve. The freedoms provided will enable school leaders to remove under-performing staff and develop programs for maximum performance. But are such claims warranted?

Despite recent claims in the media of the extraordinary improvements in student achievements from a landmark study, the research-based support for school autonomy is far from convincing.

What do we actually know about school autonomy and its impact on student outcomes?

A rich history (both for and against)

In many ways, Australia was a leading adopter of school autonomy – particularly in the ACT and Victoria. The world's leading advocate of self-managing schools, Brian Caldwell, is based in Melbourne.

As a result, there is a rich history of systemic reforms, advisory roles to governments, publications, and scholarly critique. Rarely however have these diverse sources come together to deliver a comprehensive statement on the merits of school autonomy for improving student outcomes.

Apples and oranges

Obscuring the debate on the merits of school autonomy is the slippery use of language. We have decentralisation, devolution, self-managing, school autonomy, principal autonomy, independent public schools, just to name a few. Internationally we can add charter schools (US), academies (England), free schools (Sweden), and the growth of for profit providers running schools in India and Africa among others. Without due attention, all of these reforms are used interchangeably to make arguments both for and against.

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Correlation and causation

Support for increased autonomy is frequently found in large-scale international tests. In particular, OECD claims that in countries where schools have greater autonomy students tends to perform better. The presence of autonomy at the school level does not mean that it is the cause of improved or higher performance.

What is often omitted from this OECD evidence is that this autonomy is specific to what is taught and how students are assessed. Such a degree of autonomy is not part of the current reform agenda. It is actually possible to claim the counter. The advent of national testing (e.g. NAPLAN), national curriculum, national professional standards, teacher education reforms, and public accountabilities such as MySchool create an environment far from autonomous.

Indirect impact

In an era where John Hattie's work on effect sizes and impact has come to dominate education dialogue and debate, it is a little surprising that a reform with little – and mixed – empirical support has remained so popular.

It has frequently been reported that there is a lack of rigorous and robust evidence that school autonomy leads to better student outcomes. Even an evaluation study from the University of Melbourne on independent public schools found 'little evidence of changes to student outcomes' and 'no substantive increase in student achievement'.

Similar findings have been published from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Even the OECD has presented mixed evidence. In short, the empirical evidence for school autonomy and improved student outcomes is at best, inconclusive.

Absence of debate

What is most disappointing is the absence of serious dialogue and debate on the merits of school autonomy.

In a 2012 review of related literature for the evaluation of empowering local schools for the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations, any form of critique or contrary research was reduced to a single sentence – 'robust criticism were mounted'. Similarly, in the recent media reports, critique was dismissed as straw man arguments.

In the interest of advancing the work of schools, there is a need for serious dialogue and debate. The logic of argument and refutation would bring about clarity on what school autonomy really means, what evidence we have to support it (or not), and what we need to know.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the argument for greater autonomy is persuasive. The logic of the claim seems like common-sense and impossible to refute. This however is the greatest danger of the debate. The unquestioned support of a common-sense claim is not helpful for improving performance in the Australian education system. This is not to say that school autonomy is not a factor, or even the answer. Rather, I argue that we simply do not know. The evidence at this point is inconclusive. Dialogue and debate is minimal – and more likely to be people talking past one another. To that end, we cannot claim that school autonomy will improve student outcomes.

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October 7th at 8:00pm (AEST)

Does School Autonomy Lead to Improved Student Outcomes?

Join ACEL Members in this discussion.

In a world of autonomy and decen-tralisation it is incumbent upon school leaders to create champions and develop their capacity to lead in their areas of expertise.

Perspectives

Dean Finlay
Principal, Ocean Road Primary School

'Does school autonomy lead to improved student outcomes?'

"Once principals and teachers know how to use their decision-making powers, autonomy makes a difference. Some of the improvements are quite extraordinary"
Professor Brian Caldwell

Ocean Road Primary School became an Independent Public School in January 2013. However, prior to applying for IPS status we spent five years preparing to ensure we were ready to take on the responsibilities that come with autonomy. This included the establishment of tight organisational structures, processes and controls commensurate with government and departmental policy. To assist staff an array of tools, manuals and flowcharts were created as procedural support. As a result of this umbrella of safety and accountability staff are able to operate with the confidence and autonomy necessary for them to be innovative, take risks and apply their broad range of knowledge and skills.

During this time, using Jim Collins' concept of getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus and the right people in the right seats, enabled us to establish a team that was united and committed to achieving our shared goals.

Once our team was created we were able to collaboratively create our own Hedgehog Concept*.

With our Hedgehog Concept in place, all decisions regarding teaching and learning programs; and physical and financial resourcing are made with a clear focus on achieving a successful learning community.

The flexibility associated with being autonomous allows us to allocate resources in the areas of greatest need using current research and evidence based practices to ensure we are having maximum impact on student learning.

In a world of autonomy and decentralisation it is incumbent upon school leaders to create champions and develop their

capacity to lead in their areas of expertise. We have achieved this in Literacy and Numeracy; Visible Learning; Classroom Management and Instructional Strategies; Learning Technologies; Academic Extension; and Students at Educational Risk.

So, to answer the question 'does school autonomy lead to improved student outcomes?'

Ocean Road Primary School's NAPLAN progress has exceeded like schools, Western Australian Schools and Australian Schools in most areas tested for three consecutive years. The table below utilises John Hattie's Effect Size tool to show progress in NAPLAN for those students who have sat the test in Year 3 and Year 5 at Ocean Road Primary School.

As evidenced in John Hattie's Visible Learning research into the factors having the greatest impact on student learning, school autonomy alone will not improve student outcomes. Without effective instructional leadership, quality evidence and research based teaching practices, positive student/teacher relationships, effective feedback, student expectations and acceleration the impact of school autonomy could prove to be negligible.

OCEAN ROAD PRIMARY

What we are passionate about
Developing individuals with the capacity to excel in all aspect of their lives

Successful learning community

World class, high quality research and evidence based teaching practice
What we can be the best at

Capable, responsible, flexible, resilient and successful learners
Our Educational Driver

NAPLAN Scores for Students In the Stable Cohort		Effect Size (0.8 expected over two years)				
		Numeracy	Reading	Spelling	Grammar	Writing
2011 - 2013	Year 3 – 5	1.45	1.2	1.32	1.21	1.45
2012 - 2014	Year 3 – 5	1.69	1.33	1.29	1.45	1.62
2013 - 2015	Year 3 – 5	1.67	1.13	1.91	1.18	1.44

*Good to Great - Jim Collins

Autonomy discussions . . . rarely encompasses broader notions of curriculum, student learning, assessment and school culture.

Perspectives

Christine Cawsey AM
Principal,
Rooty Hill High School

Three Reasons to Question the Value of School Autonomy

The education profession needs to continue to challenge, question and confront any policy that does not have an effect size on student performance and outcomes that is greater than expected growth. I want to suggest three reasons principals, teachers and parents should question the impact (and value) of the policy of school autonomy.

Reason 1.
Autonomy is simply not the main game

In my long experience as a principal, autonomy discussions in Australia either use an ambiguous definition or are limited to discussions of governance, management of finance and staffing and school operations. The Australian literature rarely encompasses broader notions of curriculum, student learning, assessment and school culture.

In fact, the most recent reports about autonomy have been written during the mandated implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the ongoing mandating of A-E reporting from Kindergarten to the final years of school, tighter attendance regulations and significant cuts to vocational options for secondary students. In these critical professional areas, governments remain committed to strong, centralised controls over the curriculum and the professional work of teachers and schools, while delegating more clerical and administrative work to principals and school staff. Moving principals and teachers from their roles as educational leaders to administrative managers will not, of itself, improve the learning or performance of students.

The "elephant in the room" is school funding – and, critically, needs based funding. Autonomy proponents often assume all students and all schools are the same, and that given greater independence, all will do better. There is little or no evidence to support this view without discussing needs based school

funding, especially when the majority of more autonomous schools being studied in Australia are either "richer" or have policies applied that do not extend to all schools.

In his address to the ACEL conference in 2014, John Hattie said that 65% of schools in Australia were among the best schools in the world . The ability of many parents to make a private economic decision to choose a secondary school for their children masks that fact that 35% of Australian schools meet the needs of communities where parents and, more critically students have little or no choice or opportunity and where students start 3-5 years behind their peers in other schools. Unfunded school autonomy is unlikely to improve the circumstances of those schools.

Reason 2.
Autonomy in government schools is defined by legislation as delegated authority

If autonomy means the capacity to be self-governing, it also means the capacity to be free from external influence and control. Tax payers do not want governments, border forces, businesses, schools or individuals to be free to do as they want with children and schools. The community values the role that governments play in ensuring that all Australian schools can deliver high quality education for all students.

As a government school principal, my role is defined by a complex set of legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks. My authority to lead and manage the school in the best interest of students comes from three sources – the community, the employer and the profession – and each source has high expectations of accountability within a system of schools.

Strategies like autonomy and "quick fix" programs, including management autonomy, can be a distractor in the real and complex work of learning and teaching.

Like some of the most successful service organisations in Australia, NSW Government and Catholic systemic schools are organised as local or specialist branches with common policies, procedures and regulations that are managed by the central office, leaving the schools with capacity to offer "customer service" in terms of site specific school plans, curriculum delivery and community engagement. I value the expertise of bureaucrats who support the school in system wide management areas like recruitment, legal disputes, issues management and industrial relations, leaving me with more time to work with staff, students and parents on key school planning, student learning, well-being and community projects.

The educational world is changing. In the last 15 years there has been a movement among the profession across the world to become more connected than ever before, using new technologies to extend teacher understanding and use of learning networks, professional learning communities, communities of practice, school teams and community organisations. Powerful international and national professional associations have emerged in the last decade. Their most significant feature is their commitment to working together (not working alone) to address the challenges facing education. Their professional structures, practices and philosophies are the antithesis of those promoted by autonomy ideologues.

**Reason 3.
Culture is more critical than strategy to school and student success in the 21st century**

In a country where all students should have the opportunity to do their best at school, the management structures and practices of schools should be aligned to support the school's culture and purpose, observed in one or more of these critical aspects of the school: its expectations, leadership and learning culture, the opportunities it provides, the values it promotes and the learning relationship it pursues.

Across the world there are highly successful schools in systems with high levels of control and the same is true of more delegated systems and all management models have both strengths and risks. For example, two risks of independence (autonomy) are isolation and loose coupling. By contrast, the risks of high control systems include dependence based on tight coupling and risk aversion.

In my opinion, neither approach understands the nature of school culture. To be successful Australia needs its schools, students and teachers to be interdependent and to take advantage of sharing best practice with each other. When teachers work together, when teachers are morally coupled to shared purposes and when students and classes remain at the heart of the work, strong, evidence based learning cultures emerge. In this context, strategies like autonomy and "quick fix" programs, including management autonomy, can be a distractor in the real and complex work of learning and teaching.