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Chapter · December 2020

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Chapter 5

The English School Reforms: Competition, Innovation and Fragmentation



Mel Ainscow and Maija Salokangas

The last 30 years have seen efforts by successive governments, of different political persuasions, to improve the English education system. Common to all of these reform efforts is a concern to close the gap in attainment between students from economically disadvantaged students and their peers, although the approaches tried have varied considerably. More recently, they have involved an increased emphasis on the idea of allowing schools greater autonomy within a policy context based on market forces as the main improvement strategy.

In this chapter, we analyse these developments in order to draw lessons for those in other countries who are interested in promoting greater equity within their national education systems. This leads us to argue that whilst school autonomy can be a positive force—particular where it encourages teachers to work together in exploring more inclusive practices—it requires coordination at the local level and the introduction of accountability arrangements that provide space for experimentation, as well as resources to promote the professional development of teachers.

5.1 School Autonomy

As countries throughout the world seek to improve their national education systems there is an increasing emphasis on the idea of school autonomy (Meyland-Smith & Evans, 2009). This takes a variety of forms and the schools involved have different

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titles, such as charter schools in the USA, free schools in Sweden, academies in England and independent public schools in parts of Australia. Implicit in these new types of independent state funded schools is an assumption that greater autonomy will allow space for the development of organisational arrangements, practices, and forms of management and leadership, that will be more effective in promoting the learning of all of their students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged and minority backgrounds.

This global policy trend is a matter of considerable debate and there are varied views as to the extent to which it is leading to the desired outcomes. In particular, there is a concern that the development of education systems based on autonomy, coupled with high-stakes accountability and increased competition between schools, will further disadvantage learners from low-income and minority families.

Across countries that have adopted the idea of school autonomy, we also see evidence of a worrying trend towards greater segregation. For example in Sweden segregation has grown within the education system since the introduction of market-based reforms, including autonomous free schools (Bunar, 2010; Wiborg, 2010). In the USA this is particularly ironic, since one of the early advocates of charter schools, Albert Shanker, the then president of the American Federation of Teachers, intended that they would address the problem created by community segregation in order to develop schools that bring together children from different backgrounds. He also anticipated that they would facilitate greater involvement of teachers in decision making (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

Meanwhile, there is limited evidence regarding what is actually happening inside these schools in relation to decision-making about policies and practice, and the extent to which this is leading to increased innovation and improved educational outcomes. This lack of evidence arises, in part at least, because these developments are relatively recent. It is also the case that researchers have found it difficult to get access to the schools in ways that would allow them to dig deeper into what goes on because of the intensive political pressures that are often associated with their existence.

5.2 The English Reforms

A major strand in the move towards school autonomy in England has been the rapid expansion of the academies programme. This involves schools being funded directly by national government, rather than through a local authority.¹ The foundations for academies were laid well before the programme was launched, during the period of the Thatcher governments from 1979 to 1997, with the creation of what were called grant-maintained schools. Some of the other key policy changes of that era that had long-term consequences included: the creation of a free market approach

¹There are 152 local authorities in England. Traditionally they have been responsible for schools in their areas.

to education by increasing parental choice and school diversity; the publication of school inspection reports and public league tables of school 'performance' in tests; local management of schools, including changes in funding allocations to a per-pupil basis; and the introduction of the national curriculum (West & Bailey, 2013).

Academies were launched in the year 2001 with the aim of replacing inner-city secondary schools that were defined as requiring 'special measures' as a result of being inspected. What was distinctive about the early academies was that, although they were state-funded, they became autonomous from local authority control, had their own sponsor, and were given greater freedom regarding the national curriculum and national agreements on teachers' pay and conditions. Instead of local authority governance, these schools are self-governing non-profit charitable trusts, the terms of which are set out in an individual funding agreement. However, like all other state-funded schools in England, they are subject to regular inspections and their students sit the same national exams as their peers in other schools.

Since these earlier initiatives, the academies programme has undergone considerable changes and growth. Following the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, and then the Conservative government in 2015, it has moved from targeting urban secondary schools seen as 'failing', to a system-wide structural change causing seismic shifts in the English education landscape. Writing about this reform, Eyles and Machin (2015) comment:

The academies programme that has been undertaken in English education is turning out to be one of the most radical and encompassing programmes of school reform that has been seen in the recent past in advanced countries (page 1).

An independent Commission set up to review these developments pointed out that the original aim of academies was 'to address entrenched failure in schools with low performance, most particularly, schools located in the most disadvantaged parts of the country' (Husbands, Gilbert, Francis, & Wigdortz, 2013: 4). Since then, the focus has changed towards increasing the autonomy of all schools and setting up new academies throughout the country. Meanwhile, all new schools that open must now take the form of free schools, using the academies legislation as their legal framework.

Since 2010, government policies have also encouraged relatively successful schools to convert to academy status, as well as further emphasizing the idea of forcing schools in difficulty to become members of an academy chain. Together, these responses have accelerated the pace of change, leading to the years 2010–2013 being referred to as the 'Wild West' of academy growth (Ladd & Fiske, 2016). Consequently, the number of schools that have become academies is such that, by July 2016, 60% of secondary schools and 18% primary schools were operating under academy status, with about two-thirds of them being converter rather than sponsored academies (DfE, 2016). Considering that the number of academies up and running in the year 2010 was only 272, the rise to approximately 6,000 by the summer of 2017, indicates that the pace of change has been fierce.

These developments are set within a policy context in which the dominant model has become schools linking together in multi-academy trusts, with oversight coming

from national rather than local government (Mansell, 2016). This has also brought with it new players, as noted in a report the House of Commons Education Select Committee, which states:

Academy sponsorship has encouraged and facilitated the contribution of individuals not previously involved in education provision and laid down a challenge to maintained schools to improve or face replacement by the insurgent academy model.

HoC Education Committee (2015: 3)

As a result of this expanding academies programme, the education system in England has become increasingly diverse. Furthermore, the introduction of various other types of schools that operate under the academy legislation—such as free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges—has contributed to the complexity of the scene. Indeed, in a mapping exercise of schools, based on legal status, curricular specialism, student selection, types of academy and school groupings, Courtney (2015) identifies as many as 70 or more types of school are currently operating in the English system. All of which suggests that, autonomous schools are well on the way to becoming *the* system of English state education, which makes it a particularly interesting case to study. However, what is not yet clear is the impact on those working within this remodelled system.

5.3 Taking a Closer Look

We were able to take a close look of the impact of this radical reform agenda within schools through our longitudinal study of ‘Parkside’,² one of the first academies set up (see Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017, for a more detailed account of this research). Our account was developed as a result of Mel’s involvement as a participant observer over a ten-year period. During that time, data were also generated in the school in relation to a number of more formal research studies. More in-depth evidence was collected through systematic ethnographic research carried out by Maija, who spent over a year in the school, examining documents, observing practices and decision-making, and carrying out interviews.

Parkside Academy was seen as something of a flagship of one of the larger academy groups operating in England. When it opened in the early 2000s, it was located in the building of its predecessor school and then moved into purpose-built accommodation some 24 months later. The Principal was appointed before the new school opened, giving her time to assess the situation and formulate what were to be radical changes in the way it would operate. For example, one of us was present when she announced to the staff that teachers, as well as students, would be expected to follow a dress code once the new school opened. The Principal also made a decision to distance the school from the local authority of which it had previously been part.

²All names have been changed to avoid identification of the school.

As we have explained, the early academies programme was aimed at inner city secondary schools seen to be ‘failing’. The argument supporting this policy was that closing down a failing school operating in challenging circumstances, and with a history of poor examination results, and replacing it with an academy would cut the cycle of underperformance. This was explained in the 2001 Green paper, ‘Schools: Building on success—Raising standards, promoting diversity, achieving results’ (DfEE, 2001):

City Academies offer a radical option to help raise achievement in areas of historic under-performance... City Academies are all-ability schools with the capacity to transform the education of children in areas of disadvantage and need. They will raise standards by innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum, offering a broad and balanced curriculum with a specialist focus in one area.

As with all of the first wave of academies, Parkside replaced a secondary school with a bad reputation. It is located in an urban district we call ‘Green End’, an area which is associated with a history of severe financial and social disadvantage, as well as cultural diversity. In terms of the diverse multicultural nature of the area, according to Census 2001, just over 50% of the ward’s population consisted of ethnic minority groups. Of these groups, African-Caribbean and Black African are the largest groups, others including Indian, Pakistani and Chinese.

Green End has been reported to lack social cohesion, with tensions—and at times, open conflicts—between resident groups. There were race-riots in the early 1980s, of which a social worker in the area commented: ‘The disturbances have to be set aside the background of young people in the area being denied hope. The local schools’ expectations of them were pretty low.’ While those with long connections to the area feel that it is now safer, more cohesive, and more prosperous than in the 1970s and 1980s, there remain concerns about incidents of gun crime and gang violence

Having said that, it is important not to fall into the trap of assuming that everything about the area is a problem. One of us was part of a team of researchers that carried out an analysis of the area during the early years of Parkside’s existence (Ainscow et al., 2007). This pointed to the many assets and resources that can be built on. So, for example, we found that there are many within the community that have a high regard for what schools have to offer. Indeed, some families have gone through enormous difficulties to bring their children to a part of the world that they see as offering many opportunities to achieve a better life.

Fair access to an appropriate education is seen to be a key equity issue in relation to secondary education in the Green End area. Amongst the secondary schools serving learners from the area, apart from Parkside, there is a faith school and three single sex schools. In addition, there are, within a short bus journey, three independent selective grammar schools, where families are required to pay fees. This diversity of provision is rather typical of the pattern across England, although the details vary from place to place.

During the period when Parkside was opened, local authority officers reported an established ‘hierarchy of desirability’ based on attainment, with the faith school at the top and the Academy at the bottom. Data at that time also revealed distinct

patterns in school populations, with the faith school catering predominantly for white and Afro-Caribbean learners; the separate girls' and boys' schools, white and Asian learners; while Parkside had a much more ethnically diverse population. One parent explained these patterns as resulting from particular groups of parents choosing to send their children to schools where, in the light of growing inter-ethnic tensions within the district, 'they thought they would be safe'.

Government policies to increase parental choice and, with this, diversity in educational provision, were reported to be doing little to change the nature of educational provision in the area, nor was it equitable in terms of access. The view was expressed that 'all schools in the area select', and that this was particularly the case with the higher attaining schools, which attracted more applicants than places.

Meanwhile, some parents were seen to be better able to manoeuvre the admissions system than others, leading to a lack of choice for ill-informed families—who are also often the most vulnerable families. It was suggested to us that these families often assume that their child will go to the nearest school and do not complete admissions procedures, meaning that the local authority is unable to act to facilitate access to schooling.

Parents were also reported to make school choices based on factors such as whether they liked the uniform and local hearsay, with schools' reputations and their actual performance not necessarily matching. Some parents were known to express a negative preference, making comments such as, 'I want my child to go anywhere other than the Academy', with the consequence that their child ended up going to the only schools left open to them as alternatives. In terms of their academic profiles and levels of deprivation, these schools were, at the time, on a par with Parkside, and children who attended them had to travel significant distances and were therefore unlikely to have many peers from their local neighbourhood alongside them in the classroom.

As a result of these historical factors, it is reasonable to assume that, when it was set up, Parkside Academy had a more 'challenging' intake than other secondary schools serving the area. Certainly, its student population was drawn almost exclusively from the immediate locality. It also tended to include those whose parents did not look to exercise a choice through local authority admissions procedures, and those children who did not get places at other 'more desirable' schools. Compared to the other schools in the area, the Academy's intake was, therefore, skewed towards those experiencing the highest levels of deprivation in the area.

5.4 A School on the Move

Three key issues rose from our study of developments at Parkside: the dynamic nature of improvement; the relationship between school autonomy and teacher autonomy; and the role of the sponsor in decision-making. Focusing firstly on the dynamic nature of improvement, during its first five years, Parkside was reshaped into a context characterised by greater optimism, a safer working climate and much higher

expectations. This was reflected in the school's massively improved results in national examinations and, eventually, in an inspection report that designated it as being 'outstanding' (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). It is also important to report that we have subsequently heard reports from former students who talk with pride regarding their experience at the school, not least the impact that the Principal and staff have had on their post-school life chances.

In all these respects, what was achieved at Parkside in its early years was remarkable by any standards. It is also an encouraging example of how the policy of giving schools that are struggling a new start and greater freedom, under different management and governance arrangement, can act as a catalyst for improvement.

However, some years later, following a series of changes in leadership and staffing, the examination results declined and a subsequent inspection led Parkside to be designated as 'requiring improvement' (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). This suggests that, despite the short-term success of the strategies that were used to improve examination results, they are unlikely to ensure longer-term improvements. It also leads us to challenge the assumption embedded in the academy policy rhetoric suggesting that increased autonomy will necessarily lead to greater freedom to innovate amongst teaching staff.

Secondly, our research throws light on the way that teacher autonomy was constrained in this otherwise autonomous school. In particular, we saw how the standards-driven culture and a highly regulated assessment policy limited teachers' pedagogical decision-making, not only framing their assessment practices, but impacting indirectly on their curricular decisions. This became most apparent through the ways in which planning and teaching were designed and conducted to most efficiently prepare students for examinations. Within this context, the overhanging fear of failure in examinations was seen to make staff reluctant to become involved in any form of risk-taking. This is peculiar, since one of the core arguments supporting early academies was that teachers were to have more freedom to innovate in their practice.

Thirdly, the evidence we collected portrays an image of an organisation with a heavily centralised approach to governance. In particular, we saw how decision-making regarding leadership recruitment and the membership of the local governing body, plus the existence of a powerful executive board, were symptomatic of an organisation holding significant levels of central power. And, inevitably, this meant that less space is left available for those stakeholders away from the centre.

Meanwhile, Parkside's sponsor did embrace the autonomy to which academies are entitled in dealing with various factors to do with the running of Parkside. In particular, we heard how staff reported lower pay and longer hours than their colleagues enjoy in the maintained sector. How far these differences are notable and, as such, how significant are the savings the sponsor gains from these contracts and in what ways these possible gains are spent, were questions beyond the scope of our research.

These changes reflect the increased autonomy of academies, particularly when it comes to decisions about major areas of policy. Significantly, they took place in the absence of the involvement of a local authority that might have been in a position to offer constructive advice from a more detached perspective.

Importantly, our account of developments in Parkside also throws light on processes which can lead a school that has been ‘turned round’ to go into decline. The idea that schools regress to the mean is far from new but, to our knowledge, there are few if any ethnographic accounts of how the process of regression actually happens. In the case of Parkside, it seems that the erosion of professional autonomy may well have been a factor in the school’s regression. Once this has gone, we suggest, a school has less resilience to deal with the difficulties it faces. In such contexts, schools need to be autonomous only insofar as this means being free (and competent) to follow instructions from above. There may be some real autonomy at different levels, but the autonomy is always prescribed. If the instructions from on high are flawed, or if they fail to deal effectively with local circumstances, there is little else for the system to fall back on.

5.5 Wider Implications

Linking our analysis of developments at Parkside to other research leads us to argue that, although English academies are legally freed from the national curriculum—which arguably gives them space to experiment with educational approaches—this autonomy is largely theoretical. Based on this evidence, we conclude that because an academy’s performance is measured against the same national performance indicators as other schools, in reality, examinations and inspections set a tight frame for educational practice in these schools (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017; Kauko & Salokangas, 2015). In the case of Parkside, the pressures this created led the sponsoring organisation to centralise much of the decision making.

As a result, Parkside’s sponsor was seen to have a significant capacity to experiment with matters to do with the school’s management, governance and administration, which it utilised actively. The approaches introduced included: altering teaching pay and conditions; extending the school day; and shortening holidays for senior leaders in comparison to the maintained sector contracts. They also included alternative approaches to principal recruitment, as well as minimising the involvement of local governors.

These ways in which the sponsor actively used the freedoms it had under the legislation to experiment echo developments reported from other sponsored academies in England (see, for example, Kulz, 2015; Salokangas & Chapman, 2014; Stevenson, 2016). They are also in line with the views of one of the key architects of the early academies policy, Andrew Adonis, who was at that time Minister of State for Education. In his book *‘Education, Education, Education: Reforming England’s Schools’*, Adonis clarifies how the autonomy associated with academies should be understood:

Academies are independent state schools but it is often stated, wrongly, that the magic academy ingredient is independence alone. Rather, it is strong, independent governance and leadership. To be effective, the governors - and the headteachers and management teams they appoint and sustain - need to be unambiguously in control of their schools without

managerial interference from local and national bureaucracies... It is crucial to understand that 'independence' and 'sponsorship' go together and cannot be separated.

(Adonis, 2012: 123–124)

In these senses, Parkside can be seen as an exemplary case of a sponsored academy.

Relating our analysis of what happened at Parkside Academy to more recent international developments, confirms our view that such reforms are increasingly shaped by a belief that improvements in schools will be achieved by an intensification of market forces that increase competition. In this context, parental choice is seen to encourage schools to try harder in order to improve their performance within national testing systems, which are focused on a relatively narrow set of learning outcomes. As a result, the innovations taking place tend to mainly involve changes in governance, management and administrative arrangements, often within groupings of schools.

This market-based thinking contrasts with the views of some of the early school autonomy supporters (e.g. Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014), whose purpose was to provide greater space for school level practitioners to explore ways of working that would best suit their particular students. In this way of thinking, independent state schools were seen as laboratories that are intended to generate new ways of working that can be shared with other schools in order to promote a kind of bottom-up system-wide change. Some advocates also stressed the importance of schools having strong links with their local communities and the other schools that serve them (Meyland-Smith & Evans, 2009).

There are many individual examples, not least Parkside Academy, which show that greater autonomy can be effective in promoting rapid improvements in the attainment of students as measured by national testing systems, including those from disadvantaged and minority populations. However, the overall evidence from other countries we have considered is less convincing (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). There are also concerns that where progress has been achieved this has involved the use of standardized, one-size-fits-all responses, within an approach that involves a narrowing of the educational diet. However, the extent to which educational success and failure should be based on the narrow view of education that standardised testing implies is an important question which should be discussed and challenged.

Similarly, there is little international evidence to suggest that independent state schools are promoting greater social integration within school systems, another of the hopes of early advocates. Indeed, there are worrying trends suggesting movement in an opposite direction (e.g. Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Swanson, 2017; Wiborg, 2010). In terms of overall improvements, this has to be a concern, since there is increasing evidence that learner diversity can be a catalyst for bringing practitioners together in ways that stimulate professional learning. For example, the progress that has occurred in London and other urban contexts in England over the last 15 years, illustrate the potential of adopting such an inclusive approach (Ainscow, 2015; Claeys et al., 2014; Greaves et al., 2014; Hutchings et al., 2012).

Related to all of this, the expectation that these reforms would lead to reductions in bureaucracy as a result of local authorities having little, if any, involvement in the management of schools is another important issue. The worry is that, as with

Parkside, the efforts of 'new' administrators to centralise policy decisions for their groups of schools have simply replaced one form of top-down control with another. Meanwhile, there are concerns that no one organisation has an overall coordinating role within a local district, such that existing inequities of provision could continue and, possibly, grow.

Having said of all of that, it is encouraging to report that there are examples of academies and multi-academy trusts that continue to develop creative and principled ways of working (Kerr & Ainscow, 2017). Whilst they necessarily satisfy narrow national requirements in terms of curriculum and outcomes, people in these schools seem to understand education to be about more than measured attainment and have a broader view of how their students live and what they need to develop into successful adults. This view leads them to address a wider range of factors that disadvantage some of their students than prior attainments. It may also lead some schools to develop a view of education which is about processes rather than outcomes alone, and which therefore sees diversity in terms of respect and recognition, rather than as a barrier to achievement.

5.6 Drawing Out the Lessons

By focusing on developments in England, we have examined the implications of a growing international trend that promotes greater school autonomy as the means of improving state education systems. As we have explained, the assumption is that this will allow space for innovations, leading to new organisational arrangements, practices, and forms of management and leadership, that will be more effective in promoting the learning of all students.

This global policy trend remains a matter of considerable debate and, as we have noted, there are varied views as to the extent to which it is leading to the desired outcomes. Meanwhile, there is limited evidence regarding what is actually happening within these schools in relation to decision-making about policies and practice, and the extent to which this is leading to increased innovation and improved educational outcomes.

Our case study of Parkside has begun the process of filling this gap. In drawing out lessons from this experience, we adopt a pragmatic view that takes account of the fact that the movement towards greater autonomy is picking up speed across the world. In addressing this agenda, we also recognise that there are no simple solutions to what are complex problems. What we can do, however, is to reach out to reformers, and to local actors involved in negotiating reforms, in order to offer them signposts and critical thinking tools that can inform their future actions.

We have argued that, in the main, autonomous school reforms in England have not, as yet, successfully delivered on their ambitious promises. A central reason for this is that there have been contradicting forces at play, pulling the reforms in different directions. The coexistence of these forces has created tensions that have

blurred the sense of purpose. In so doing, this has hindered autonomous schools from achieving what they were expected to achieve.

In summary, we see three main contradictory forces. First of all, there is a tension between free market approaches and educational equity. As we have shown, the autonomous school movement is closely aligned with free market approaches in education, i.e. increased choice and competition, deregulation of provision, and opening public school management and governance to new players. The argument put forward to support these moves suggests that they will enhance educational opportunities for all children, since parents will be in a better position to choose what they see as the 'best' school. This, in turn, will enhance competition, so that standards in all schools will rise.

However, if we look at evidence from different countries across the world, it becomes evident that market approaches in education have not helped in achieving educational equity and social justice. For example, parental choice and competition between schools has widened the gap between desirable schools and less desirable schools in countries as varied as: Chile (Carrasco et al., 2015), Sweden (Wiborg, 2010) and Finland (Kosunen, 2014). This evidence suggests that divisions between what are seen as 'good' and 'bad' schools contribute to social injustice in varied ways. What it also tells us, is that middle class, well-educated and wealthier parents tend to be much more capable at making preferable choices in competitive school markets than parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Ball, 2003; van Zanten, 2009; Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010). In addition, where countries have a private fee-paying tier, these schools mainly serve better off families.

These examples provide a flavour as to how market approaches in education, including autonomous school reforms, have failed to create more equitable school systems. They lead us to join the growing ranks of researchers contesting the argument that the education market will fix the system from within and, in so doing, reduce social inequalities to the particular advantage of learners from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead, we argue that if we truly want to see progress towards educational equity, some degree of steering is needed in ensuring that the students in most need receive the support they require.

The second tension arises from the belief in innovation as a fix for many of the ills that are seen to exist in schools. In contrast, we argue that blind belief in innovations 'for innovations sake' is incompatible with the nature of work taking place in schools. Let us illustrate what we mean. Innovation has become a buzzword in recent years, which, as a term, carries great promise of a quick fix and a brighter future. However, it is not only education policy and public discourses that have been plagued with innovation hype, but public policy and governance more widely (Hodgson, 2012; Russell & Vinsel, 2016). This belief in the power of innovation as a solution to many ills can be traced back to technology industry discourses. Indeed, parallels have been drawn between autonomous school innovations and technological developments. So, for example, some promoters of disruptive innovation in education have claimed that charter schools should disrupt the education monopoly (Jacobs, 2015), following the direction taken by Uber in developing its taxi empire (Haeffele-Balch & Boettke, 2016).

Innovation holds a promise of something better than what was there before, simultaneously discrediting old practices as being poor. However, this kind of innovation hype is particularly problematic in relation to education, as it tends to ignore the unpredictable social nature of what takes place in schools, be it student learning, or staff efforts in academic, pastoral care, or administrative work. Take teachers' practices as an example. In reality, their tasks involve a mix of routine and creativity; careful planning and thinking on your feet; tried and tested methods and experimenting with new ones, which sometimes work and sometimes do not. Anybody who has worked as a teacher knows that much of teaching can be repetitive drudgery, as with the learning of certain crucial skills and content, be it irregular verbs in second language, tables in maths or learning to swim, require considerable repetitive efforts from the learner to master. However, an experienced teacher also knows that teaching certain content and skills lend themselves to exploration, creativity, problem solving and Eureka-moments.

In relation to administrative and pastoral care work in schools, the term innovation tends to be an even worse fit, as both should safeguard and ensure the long term the well-being of all students. Quick fix administrative innovations can, at worst, be risky for students, as they may destabilise the day to day work taking place.

The important thing here is to acknowledge this multifaceted and complex nature of work taking place in schools, and the fact that not all 'old, or tried and tested' practice is automatically poor. In line with the argument of Russell and Vinsels (2016), we suggest that instead of focusing on innovations, we should pay more attention to the maintenance of these complex systems and equip practitioners with the skills to improve the system 'from within'. That said, we acknowledge the importance of professional learning, creativity, and the continuous development of new ways of working in schools. We also consider it a high priority to offer school staff opportunities to enhance their practices, learn, explore and try out new ways of working.

This is why, instead of blind belief in the power of innovations offering quick fix solutions for education, we call out for more sustainable long-term developments in which teachers and other school staff have the capacity to be creative in their ways of working. This means that we should focus on creating the organisational conditions in which a skilful workforce is able to use professional judgement in the complex social and pedagogical situations they face. It also means that practitioners must be supported by their schools and communities to do so, not least through appropriate professional development opportunities.

Finally, the third tension in the autonomous school reforms is the idea that local autonomy, especially teacher autonomy and high stakes accountability, can coexist. Put simply, it is, we suggest, intellectually dishonest to claim that individuals that are subject to high stakes accountability and control in their work environment are also autonomous in relation to their practice.

5.7 Conclusion

Despite the worrying trends that have emerged from the recent reforms in England, greater autonomy for schools still makes sense, particularly if it provides space for practitioners to innovate. The problem is that other policies based on competition between schools have sometimes prevented this from happening. Rather, they have led to a search for one-size-fits-all strategies for improving examination and test scores that can be imposed on teachers.

We therefore recommend three actions that are needed in order to make school autonomy more effective in promoting equity within the English education system:

- i. There needs to be a fundamental rethink of national accountability systems, not least the ways in which student progress and the outcomes of school inspections are reported, so that there is a focus on progress towards a much broader range of outcomes.
- ii. More resources should be aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning through continuous professional development. This is a recognition that well-educated staff, who are encouraged to upskill their knowledge, are in the best position to respond to the varied needs of their students.
- iii. Incentives need to be provided that encourage greater collaboration within schools and between schools, in order that successful practices are made available to more students. This emphasis on collaboration then needs to move beyond the school gate, with schools drawing on the energy and resources that exist within families and local communities.

Given the dangers associated with school isolation, there also has to be some form of local coordination. Unfortunately, in many areas of England no one organization has the overall picture that would enable them to orchestrate more collaborative ways of working. With this in mind, we argue that local authorities should be involved in monitoring and challenging schools—including academies—whilst head teachers and their colleagues share responsibility for the overall leadership of improvement efforts. In this respect, it is encouraging to see the recent emergence in England of new forms of area partnership arrangements (Gilbert, 2018).

All of this has significant implications for national policy makers. It suggests that, in order to make use of the potential of autonomy and minimise the risks involved, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyze their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognize that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these should be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts: teachers and principals (Ainscow & West, 2006).

There is a crucial role here for governments. They must provide a strong sense of direction regarding the principles that are intended to steer locally led developments. Linked to this, there is a need to ensure that national accountability systems reflect these principles. This involves a recognition that, within education systems,

‘what gets measured gets done’ (Ainscow, 2005). So, for example, the education systems mentioned in this chapter now collect far more statistical data on schools than ever before in order to determine their effectiveness. This trend to measure learning through test scores is widely recognized as a double-edged sword precisely because it is such a potent lever for change. On the one hand, data are required in order to monitor the progress of learners, evaluate the teaching and learning, review policies and processes, plan new initiatives, and so on.

In these senses, data can, justifiably, be seen as the life-blood of educational decision-making. On the other hand, if effectiveness is evaluated on the basis of narrow, even inappropriate, performance indicators, then the impact can be deeply damaging. While appearing to promote accountability and transparency, the use of data can, in practice: conceal more than it reveals; invite misinterpretations; and, worst of all, have a perverse effect on the behaviour of professionals to teach to the test, such that their efforts to include vulnerable children are not valued and recognized by schools and policy makers.

The challenge, therefore, is to focus on a broader range of data, where progress is determined not just in terms of scores on learning outcomes, but where information on progress regarding equity is incorporated into the analyses. This means that care needs to be exercised in deciding what evidence is collected and, indeed, how it is analysed and used. In other words, we need to measure what we value, rather than is so often the case, valuing what we can measure.

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