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Manifestations of Autonomy and Control in a Devolved Schooling System: The Case of New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper explores how two broad educational policy frameworks – the global educational reform movement (GERM) and the equity approach - have influenced and shaped recent education policy initiatives in New Zealand. The result is a tension within the New Zealand school system that simultaneously promotes and constrains teachers' control and autonomy. Three policy initiatives: (1) the move to a devolved school system; (2) the introduction of a content-free curriculum; and (3) the implementation of National Standards at the primary level, act as mini case studies to examine how aspects of top-down control and standardization simultaneously intersect and compete with teacher autonomy.

Introduction

There are two broad trends influencing school-level education-policy worldwide. The first is a policy framework associated with the global educational reform movement (GERM). This approach, introduced in countries such as the United States of America, Australia and England, emphasizes commercial and market principles in an educational setting, and "is often characterized by increased competition between schools over student enrolment, standardization of teaching and learning, reliance on standardized assessments for accountability purposes, de-professionalization of the teaching and leadership professions, and, as a consequence, privatization of public schools" (Murgatroyd & Sahlberg, 2015). Under such an approach, teachers experience decreased autonomy in the face of top-down, policy-driven accountability measures. The second approach, in contrast, is driven by a strong commitment to public control and equity, where the professionalization of teachers and teaching is elevated, and learning and education is positioned within a broader community framework (Murgatroyd & Sahlberg, 2015). In contrast to the GERM approach, the equity approach promotes greater internal accountability, positioning teachers as knowledgeable actors within an education system.

While typically presented as binary approaches to education policy, when explored in relation to New Zealand's schooling system, it is possible to identify elements of both approaches weaving through recent education policy initiatives. The result is a tension within the New Zealand school system that simultaneously promotes and constrains teachers' control and autonomy. It is against this backdrop of GERM versus equity approaches to educational policy that this essay explores manifestations of autonomy and control in relation to three policy initiatives that have shaped and are continuing to impact New Zealand's school system: (1) the move to a devolved school system; (2) the introduction of a new, content-free curriculum; and (3) the implementation of National Standards at the primary level. Each of these initiatives provides a mini case-study for exploring the tensions between top-down control and teacher autonomy in schools, and how policy initiatives can work to constrain and control, or free the work of teachers.

Tomorrow's Schools: A Devolved School System

New Zealand has one of the most autonomous school systems in the world. Since the introduction of the *Tomorrow's Schools* education reforms in 1989, responsibility for the administration and management of individual schools has shifted to independently appointed to Boards of Trustees, primarily made up of parents. The logic behind this move to self-managing, autonomous schools was that schools would be competing for students (and teachers), and this would drive innovation, better teaching and learning, and would result in a higher performing education system.

The devolution of the school system, and the corresponding increased competition among schools, aligns closely with the GERM movement (although the policy initiative pre-dates the GERM movement by a decade). However, in New Zealand, this devolution has not resulted in the increasing standardization and external accountability measures typically associated with GERM. Instead, there has been an increased autonomy and control at the teacher and school-leader level. New Zealand's school system is characterized by diversity and plurality, with individual schools having a high level of autonomy over curriculum, assessment and resources, features which are frequently identified with successful school systems

(OECD, 2010). At its best, this has provided individual schools with the flexibility and freedom to innovate and personalize their offerings, leading to pockets of excellence across the country. However, it also has led to limited cooperation and collaboration among schools, and the need for each school to develop universal capabilities, and individually to solve systemic issues.

The control that schools and their teachers have within this system places a significant onus on the professional knowledge and expertise of educators. Some have argued that the benefits associated with devolved control and high autonomy only occur when there also is rigorous accountability (Farrar, 2015; Suggett, 2015). For example, Suggett concludes from an analysis of OECD reports (OECD, 2010; 2012) that:

> The institutional context for autonomy matters, and accountability in particular makes a difference. Where accountability is weak, autonomy in both managing resources and determining curriculum and assessment can in fact worsen performance. When accountability is strong, autonomy is an advantage, although how much autonomy and where also makes a difference. (Suggett, 2015, pp. 13-14)

However, it is perhaps more the need for professional capacity than accountability that is pivotal in New Zealand's school system. As Fullan et al. (2015) argue, the professional capital of teachers, by which they mean "the collective capacity of the profession and its responsibility for continuous improvement and for the success of all students" (2015, p. 6) is an essential component of effective school systems. Where teacher autonomy is high, teacher and leader expertise must also be high. As Farrar (2015) points out: "Greater autonomy and more responsibility, not only for the improvement of your own school but also for others, makes headship … daunting" (Farrar, 2015, p. 7).

Alongside the need to build the professional capital of individual teachers and school leaders to ensure the effective application of professional autonomy, there also is a need to build collaborative practices (OECD, 2013) and focus on collective expertise, that is distributed across the system. However, in the New Zealand context, collaboration among schools and a collective approach to education has been problematic. As Wylie (2012) has observed:

> In New Zealand, self-managed schools were not positioned within webs of well-informed support and challenge, an environment of knowledge-building in which to solve shared problems and advance teaching practice, well-constructed frameworks of thinking and processing, a shared purpose and responsibility, a good infrastructure. Many of those involved in the reforms did not appreciate at the time how important these interconnections are to building and sustaining good-quality public education. (Wylie, 2012, p. 3)

All this suggests that teacher control and autonomy, without the corresponding development of professional capital or expertise, and mechanisms for maintaining aspects of a collective approach to education, can lead to particular (and in New Zealand's case seemingly unforeseen) issues arising.

A New Curriculum: An Open Approach

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) can be described as an open curriculum. While the document sets out a vision for, and the values and principles that should underpin education, and establishes a series of broad learning objectives across eight (soon to be nine) curriculum areas, it does not mandate specific content or particular approaches. Schools must teach and cover the curriculum, but the ways in which they do this are at their discretion. Furthermore, there are no set curriculum materials. Rather, each teacher or school are responsible for interpreting the curriculum, adapting it to their local context, and selecting (or creating) the necessary materials to support the teaching of it.

The curriculum document is grounded, primarily in the equity approach to education. Indeed equity – through fairness and social justice – is one of the values specifically mentioned in the curriculum document. This sense of inclusion, personalization and localization is further emphasized in the description of how the values should be applied:

> The specific ways in which these values find expression in an individual school will be guided by dialogue between the school and its community. They should be evident in the school's philosophy, structures, curriculum, classrooms, and relationships' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10).

The openness of the *New Zealand Curriculum* places a premium on teacher control and autonomy. Schools develop local curricula, where they utilise the broad framework to develop learning opportunities that are specific to the needs of their local communities. The partnership – bringing together teachers, students, families and the broader community – approach advocated for in the curriculum document aligns with part of Murgatroyd & Sahlberg's (2015) description of an equity approach to education:

> The teacher and the communities of practice to which she belongs are central to this approach to learning. Rather than "follow" the script of a master course, here teachers as professionals tailor their learning designs and activities to the needs of the individual students in their class. Working with a curriculum framework, the teacher as professional is enabled and

empowered as a designer of learning (Murgatroyd & Sahlberg, 2015, p. 13).

While the openness of the curriculum and the limited control structures placed around it does elevate teachers' choice and autonomy, it also comes with a requirement for high expertise. A rich curriculum that brings provides deep learning opportunities and builds students' knowledge is critical (see e.g., Hirsch, 2016; Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2008). However, the ability to design an effective curriculum takes considerable expertise and knowledge. It requires deep curriculum knowledge, encompassing an understanding of effective curriculum design, the conceptual progressions across curriculum areas, and the ability to bring these together in tangible learning opportunities.

In the New Zealand context, curriculum design involves both the "tight" components of the curriculum (Thompson & William, 2007) with the "loose" layer of entitlement built into the *New Zealand Curriculum*: namely, the "scope, flexibility and authority" for schools to "design and shape their curriculum so that teaching and learning is meaningful and beneficial to their particular communities of students" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37). Associated with this loose entitlement is the intention that the Achievement Objectives reflect "desirable" but not required levels of knowledge, understanding and skills …" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 39). In this conception, teachers and schools have considerable control over the curriculum to which students are exposed. The importance of the curricula choices of teachers and schools is supported by a recently released report, which conducted research in 40 New Zealand primary schools that had substantially improved the progress of their Year 4 to 8 students (Education Review Office, 2017). Common across these schools were a rich curriculum, where students were engaged in a wide range of subjects and built their core knowledge across learning areas. Furthermore, leaders in these schools often focused on improving teachers' content knowledge in conjunction with their pedagogical practice.

While the *New Zealand Curriculum* aligns closely with the empowered teacher, high autonomy aspects of the equity approach, there is, underpinning the development of the document seeds of GERM thinking and the influence of a neo-liberal approach to education (Hood & Tesar, 2018). The foreword, written by the then Secretary of Education Karen Sewell, states that

> There has been no slowing of the pace of social change. Our population has become increasingly diverse, technologies are more sophisticated, and the demands of the workplace are more complex. Our education system must respond to these and the other challenges of our times … (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 4).

The argument for educational change (in this instance represented by a new curriculum) is framed by the notion that, with the rapidly changing world, the advent of the so-called knowledge society and knowledge economy and the exponential developments that are occurring in digital technologies, a new educational paradigm is required to equip young people to enter a changing economy. This focus on equipping students to enter the workforce, something that runs almost imperceptibly throughout the document, establishes a tension for teachers. While ostensibly an equity-focused document, that provides teachers with high levels of control over curricula decisions, the openness of the *New Zealand Curriculum*, is subtly in tension with the neo-liberal, economy-focused positioning of the school system and the purposes of school-level education in New Zealand. This tension, contrasting views and contested notions of the value and purpose of school-level education is raised by educators in their discussions and debates on the implementation of the curriculum in schools. However, to date, there has been very limited engagement at a policy level on this issue.

National Standards: Top-Down Accountability

In 2010, National Standards were introduced as a way of identifying and measuring what students should know and be able to do in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of their first eight years at school (note that National Standards were scrapped in 2017 by the new Labour-led government). The case for introducing national standards was fourfold: (1) identify students at risk of "slipping behind"; (2) providing better quality reporting to parents; (3) improving the proportion of students leaving school literature and numerate; and ultimately (4) as an accountability measure for schools.

National standards represented a strong, external accountability measure in what was a largely devolved, autonomous system. It closely mirrors GERM-style reforms in other countries. National Standards were intended to provide some level of standardization in outcome across New Zealand schools in relation to curriculum, assessment and learning progression. As in other countries, it manifested as a high accountability, low trust model. The result, teachers felt disempowered, a narrowing of the curriculum.

It is important to note, however, that what set the New Zealand case apart from many other countries was the decision not to rely on standardized test scores as the primary measurement tool, but rather to utilize overall teacher judgments (OTJs). It is here that a peculiar tension lies. National standards combined a reduction in teacher autonomy, however, through the inclusion of OTJs, they also required high teacher expertise and knowledge. When teachers make OTJs on individual students, they should draw on their observations of and conversations with students, examples of student work, and the results of

standardized tests. However, the ability to make sense of what at times can be contradictory findings, and to assess the relative importance and relationship between standard measurement elements and observations of students and their work, was not adequately supported or developed among teachers. A report on the *National Standards: School Sample Monitoring and Evaluation Project, 2010-2014* (Ward & Thomas, 2016) suggested that the level of teacher knowledge and expertise to effectively and consistently apply OTJs was lacking. According to Ward and Thomas (2016) OTJs lacked dependability, with a reasonable proportion being inaccurate. This inconsistency was particularly problematic given the government's decision to publish the results across schools.

Similarly to other countries, National Standards were associated in New Zealand with a drop of morale among teachers and a narrowing of the curriculum (Bonne, 2016). The autonomy that is inherent in the New Zealand school system was constricted by a top-down accountability initiative.

> … damage being done through the intensification of staff workloads, curriculum narrowing and the reinforcement of a two-tier curriculum, the positioning and labelling of children and unproductive new tensions amongst school staff. These problems are often occurring despite attempts by schools and teachers to minimise any damaging impact of the National Standards. (Thrupp & White, 2013, p. i)

These issues further are identified in a 2016 NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools, which found that over two-thirds of teachers reported a narrowing of the curriculum they teach; 32% of principals reported that National Standards determined what the school did; and 40% indicated the focus on literacy and mathematics had taken their attention away from other aspects of The New Zealand Curriculum (Bonne, 2016, p. 1).

There is growing international evidence of the negative impact of teachers' loss of autonomy and control over curricula and assessment decisions through the implementation of external accountability measures:

> The solid and mounting evidence on the fundamental impact of internal accountability on the effectiveness and improvement of schools and school systems contrasts sharply with the scarce or null evidence that external accountability, by itself, or as the prime driver, can bring about lasting and sustained improvements in student and school performance. There is, indeed, a growing realization that external accountability is not an effective driver of school and system effectiveness. (Fullan et al., 2015, p. 6)

Indeed, as Campbell's Law tells us (Campbell, 1979, p. 85), when a measure becomes a target or part of high stakes accountability assessment, it ceases to be an effective measure. This is because measures connected to accountability targets can create unanticipated incentives. In the schooling context it often drives behaviour and actions that are focused on a very narrow set of educational outcomes, namely mathematics and literacy achievements (which can be relatively easily measured using standardized tests) at the expense of a far richer set of valued outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts

Making sense of the balance between teacher autonomy and control and accountability measures in the New Zealand context is a challenging undertaking. Educational policies do not appear to conform to just one approach. Indeed, as this essay has suggested, there are inherent tensions within single policy initiatives. Even when policies tend towards expressions of teacher autonomy and teacher control, as on balance *Tomorrow's Schools* and the *New Zealand Curriculum* seem to do, this must always be balanced with heightened professional capital of teachers. The term professional capital in education was coined by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) to describe to challenging nature of teaching, and the need for teachers to develop substantial knowledge and expertise overtime. For Hargreaves and Fullan, it is comprised of human capital (the talent of individuals); social capital (the collaborative power of the group); and decisional capital (the wisdom and expertise to make sound judgments about learners that are cultivated over many years).

The teacher as knowledgeable "knowledge worker", whose work requires significant professional capital, is present in a number of educational policies in New Zealand. However, with the elevation of the individual teacher through these policy initiatives, comes what could at times be positioned as a concerning move away from a more collective and collaborative approach to education in New Zealand. Under *Tomorrow's Schools*, schools are placed in direct competition with one another, with little or no incentives to collaborate with one another or to conceptualise education as a collective enterprise. Social capital, therefore, is eroded. Similarly, the content-free nature of the New Zealand Curriculum elevates human capital and decisional capital, with each teacher essentially devising their own local curriculum. The development of local curriculum is argued to enable the creation of learning opportunities that are uniquely responsive to the students in a particular school. However, the need for this localization must be balanced with consideration to the curricula concepts that should transcend the local and the individual. It seems that even in a policy context that emphasizes the professional

capital of teachers (and within the definition of professional capital offered by Hargreaves and Fullan) there remains questions over how to balance the personal with the collective, the local with the national, the individual with the collaborative.

What emerges from the three mini case studies in this essay is a complicated amalgamation of competing world views and philosophical positions. While it is evident that individual educational policies may work to disrupt the balance between teacher autonomy and accountability, it increasingly seems possible that this balance might also be shaken by competing ideas within a single policy initiative. This tension, perhaps in part links to a tension inherent in both the GERM and equity approaches to educational reform and policy. Under a GERM approach, top-down, standardization limit the autonomy of the individual. However, this often is also accompanied by increasing focus on the individual teacher as the one ultimately held responsible for individual student achievement. In contrast, under the equity approach, a bottom-up approach is encouraged, whereby individual teachers and schools determine the approach to teaching and learning, under a set of guiding principles. In the New Zealand context control oscillates in an often-uneasy tension between the individual teacher and central policy initiatives. While the idea of achieving the fine balance of manifestations of control and autonomy in education is most likely unattainable, it seems that in New Zealand, thinking further about how to enhance the teacher-collective and to support greater collaboration might provide one route forward.

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