

DRAFT

International Study of School Autonomy and Curriculum Innovation: An Introduction

Yin Cheong Cheng & Toby Greany

This special issue composed of seven articles reports on the initial findings from the first phase of the “*International Study of School Autonomy and Learning (ISSAL)*” research project. This project involves seven education systems: Australia, Canada (Alberta and Saskatchewan), England, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel and Singapore.

In facing the challenges of globalization, international competition and societal transformation, there have been many education reforms in different parts of the world. Among these reforms, the shift towards school autonomy has been one of the major worldwide trends in recent decades. This policy has gathered pace since the 1980s although it has had different names and emphases in different jurisdictions, including: school-based management, site-based decision making, self-managing schools and local management of schools. The arguments in favour of school autonomy are that it can provide the conditions for increased flexibility and adaptability in school operations, enhanced staff commitment and initiative and more effective teaching and learning, leading to improved outcomes for children. It often assumed that schools with increased autonomy can be more adaptive to the changing educational environment, with greater capacity to make successful curricular and pedagogical changes which enhance students’ learning (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013; Cheng, 1996; Volansky & Freidman, 2003).

School autonomy has often been developed in the context of wider quasi-market reforms, such as parental choice of school, and is generally associated with New Public Management-type approaches to reform (Greany, 2015). Certainly, two factors have been identified as particularly important for the successful development of school autonomy: high quality school leadership and a clear school accountability framework (OECD, 2013).

After nearly three decades of implementation, it is important to consider whether and how school autonomy has contributed to the enhancement of school performance and student learning. On this issue, Jensen, Weidmann and Farmer (2013) provide two critical observations from a comprehensive international review: first, both within-country and cross-country quantitative research suggests that the direct gain in school performance produced by increasing autonomy is relatively small; and second, the results of studies on the impact of

varying levels of school autonomy within countries differ quite widely, so it is difficult to generalize from them. (p.25)

As reviewed by Cheng, Ko and Lee (2016, forthcoming), there are often inconsistencies and limitations in the conceptualization of research on school autonomy, including the following: (1) internal school autonomy is insufficiently differentiated; (2) too little attention is paid to cultural autonomy and internal structural autonomy at individual and group levels; (3) school autonomy is measured mainly as perceived by principals, with no attention to the perspectives of other key stakeholders; and (4) missing conceptual links between school autonomy and learning outcomes. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the findings from international studies on the effects of autonomy on school performance and student learning across countries are often inconsistent and unclear. The effects have been found to be contingent on the nature and level of autonomy, the school's existing accountability structures and the school's level of development (e.g. PISA in Focus, 2011; Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013). Whilst there has been significant research on the nature and impact of school leadership, in terms of both school improvement and student outcomes (e.g. Leithwood et al, 2006), this has not generally been linked to questions about the level of school autonomy or the extent to which autonomy has enabled – or inhibited – curriculum or pedagogic innovation.

The seven education systems in the ISSAL research project have all implemented school autonomy to differing degrees over the past few decades and all have curriculum initiatives in place aimed at ensuring schools prepare young people for life in the 21st century. However, their policy efforts are limited by the lack of a comprehensive knowledge base and empirical findings on the complicated interplay between school autonomy, leadership accountability and curriculum innovation initiatives. To address this gap the seven international teams have worked together since May 2014 to develop and begin an appropriate international learning project.

The ISSAL project has four phases (1-4) and aims to address the *major research question*: “How does school autonomy – in terms of both structures and cultures - influence leadership practices in relation to curriculum and learning across 7 jurisdictions in the 21st Century?” Additional *research questions* include: “What aspects of structural autonomy are the most influential on leadership practices in relation to learning?” and “How do school leaders consistently utilise their autonomy to improve student outcomes, to develop successful lifelong learners, and to develop new pedagogies and 21st Century competencies?”

The articles in this special issue have been developed mainly from the conference papers presented at the symposiums of the Focal Meeting of World Education Research Association (WERA) in parallel with the European Conference of Education Research (ECER) in 8-11 September 2015. The articles report the initial baseline findings from each school system, representing a range of research activities including: reviews of national policy and evidence on practice, case studies of 'demonstration' schools, and international literature syntheses. The next stages of the project will include further case studies and a survey in each school system as well as secondary analysis of PISA and TIMSS data. Although the seven research teams have developed a shared conceptual model and research design, they are working with different models of funding and capacity and on different timescales, so the approach is conceived as a 'parallel learning project' rather than a strict comparative study.

The article *"Impact of School Autonomy on Student Achievement: Cases from Australia"* by Brian Caldwell reports on four 'demonstration' school case studies in Australia that respond to the question: 'How have schools with a relatively high degree of autonomy used their increased authority and responsibility to make decisions that have led in explicit cause-and-effect fashion to higher levels of student achievement'? The findings suggest that the schools were able to explain how the link between school autonomy and achievements had been made and that it was possible to map a cause-and-effect chain. Schools used their autonomy to select staff and allocate funds in their budgets, each being capacities that came with a higher level of autonomy. Leadership was important.

In their article *"Rebels against the system: leadership agency and curriculum innovation in the context of school autonomy and accountability in England"* Toby Greany and Joanne Waterhouse argue that whilst all schools in England have needed to adapt their curricula to reflect the new National Curriculum introduced from 2014, relatively few schools appear to have used this opportunity to design genuinely innovative curricula that respond to the changing needs of learners in the 21st Century. Leadership agency by principals and their professional teams thus seems to be more important than policy/legal freedoms for securing curriculum innovation. Such agency appears to depend on the capacity and confidence of leaders to shape an alternative and innovative curriculum in the face of structural constraints, in particular England's sharp accountability system, effectively making these leaders 'rebels against the system'.

In the article *"The development of school autonomy and accountability in Hong Kong: Multiple changes in governance, work, curriculum, and learning"* by James Ko, Yin Cheong Cheng and Theodore Lee, the interplay between school autonomy and accountability and the

impacts of these forces in education are analysed and discussed. The authors map the development of the school system and explore the multiple changes introduced in the areas of school governance and management, teacher work, curriculum development and student learning. The findings show that the assumed links and effects are not always consistent or empirically supported. The positive effects that school autonomy has on the key areas of education are significant when there is also strong leadership, comprehensive continuous professional development, and a positive, collaborative school climate. These key elements work alongside school autonomy to facilitate positive changes.

Adam Nir and his colleagues' article "*School autonomy and 21st century skills in the Israeli educational system: Discrepancies between the declarative and operational levels*" analyzes two parallel processes in the Israeli educational system: the development of school autonomy and the development of progressive education for the 21st century. The review indicates that the Israeli educational system is still caught in the "centralization trap," inhibiting major changes in the patterns of central control and degrees of freedom granted to school level educators. As for school pedagogy, it is evident that most of the changes in pedagogy suggested by numerous policy documents over the years have not resulted in sustainable, system-wide change. In both areas a significant disparity is evident between grand declarations about innovative pedagogy and school autonomy on the one hand and their actual implementation on the other.

The article "*Pedagogical reforms within a centralized-decentralized system: A Singapore's perspective to diffuse 21st century learning innovations*" by Yancy Toh and her colleagues illustrates the dialectical interplay between centralization and decentralization forces so as to understand how schools leverage the autonomous pedagogical space created and thereby influence the diffusion of innovations in the educational landscape of Singapore. Four carryover effects of diffusion that have been observed include: structural, socio-cultural, economic and epistemic. Middle managers from the two case study schools described act as pedagogical, socio-technological and financial brokers outside the formal collaborative structures organized by the Ministry of Education. Such a "middle-out" approach, complemented by centralized mechanisms, has resulted in boundary-spanning linkages and multiplier effects in terms of knowledge spillovers.

Toni Saarivirta and Kristiina Kumpulainen's article "*School autonomy, leadership, and student achievement: Reflections from Finland*" provides a literature review on Finnish studies focusing on school autonomy, leadership and student achievement. It is found that there

exists a shortage of studies connecting school leadership to student achievements. Reasons for this include the lack of information on school-based data and the nature of education being seen as a 'public good', which is supposed to meet the same standards across the country. School autonomy and leadership in terms of school performance and student achievement are not yet seen as important issues in Finland compared to many other countries. Due to the global development in increased school autonomy, more information on this regard may be needed in Finland.

The article "*School Autonomy and 21st Century Learning: The Canadian Context*" by Paul Newton and Jose Da Costa reports on the contexts of policy and practice of school autonomy and 21st Century learning in two Canadian provinces. It finds that autonomy is a complicated and multi-level phenomenon with a measure of autonomy devolved from the state to local school jurisdictions, while other elements of autonomy are devolved to schools and individual teachers. The links between autonomy and 21st Century Learning are unclear as yet. This article attempts to establish the policy context for school autonomy and 21st Century learning without making claims about a causal relation between the two. Autonomy is examined as a dynamic process among multiple layers of the educational system.

Debates on school system reform have intensified in recent years, in particular as a result of international benchmarking studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS (e.g. Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010; Fullan, 2011; Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann and Burns, 2012). The case for increased school autonomy and accountability has been widely and authoritatively made (e.g. OECD, 2012), yet the evidence around whether and how autonomy actually leads to more responsive curricula and pedagogies across different contexts remains thin. The education systems represented in this special issue reflect a wide range of approaches to school autonomy and an even wider range of cultural and social contexts straddling four continents of the world. Together they provide a unique picture of how school autonomy is developing and how it impacts on school performance, curriculum innovation, and student learning in different education systems, raising important questions for further international research (including via ISSAL) and policy debate.

References

Caldwell, B. J., & Spinks, J. M. (2013). *The Self-Transforming School*. London: Routledge.

- Cheng, Y.C. (1996). *School effectiveness and school-based management: A mechanism for development*, London, U.K.: The Falmer Press.
- Cheng, Y.C., Ko, J. & Lee, T. (2016, forthcoming). School autonomy, leadership and learning: A reconceptualization. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(2), March.
- Fullan, M (2011) *Choosing the wrong drivers for education reform*, Seminar Series Paper 204, Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne
- Greany, T. (2015) *Self-improving school systems: A review of evidence and reflections on progress in England*, Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper 241
- Hanushek, E.A., Link, S. & Woessmann, L. (2013), Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA. *Journal of Development Economics*, 104, 212-232.
- Jensen, B, Hunter, A, Sonnemann, J and Burns, T (2012) *Catching Up: Learning from the Best School Systems in East Asia*, Grattan Institute, Melbourne.
- Jensen, B, Weidmann, B and Farmer, J (2013) *The Myth of Markets in School Education*, Grattan Institute, Melbourne.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., Hopkins, D., (2006) *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*, National College for School Leadership, Nottingham, England
- Mourshed, M, Chijioke, C and Barber, M (2010) *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, McKinsey&Co, London
- OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV)*, PISA , OECD Publishing
- PISA in Focus (2011). *School autonomy and accountability: Are they related to student performance?* OECD Publishing.
- Volansky, A. & Friedman, I. (2003) (eds.). *School-based management: International perspectives* (pp.31-56). Jerusalem, Israel: Ministry of Education.