Rebels against the system: leadership agency and curriculum innovation in the context of school autonomy and accountability in England

Purpose *– This paper describes and analyses the development of school autonomy, school leadership and curriculum innovation in England over the past forty years. It provides a baseline picture for the wider international study on school autonomy and curriculum innovation.*

*A**pproach** – An initial literature review was undertaken, including policy document analysis. Interviews and observations were undertaken with participants on a pilot professional programme for school leaders seeking to develop their school curriculum.*

Findings *– While 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. This includes the academies and free schools – currently around 1 in 4 schools - which are not legally required to follow the National Curriculum. We posit that leadership agency by principals and their professional teams is 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'.*

***L**imitations** – The empirical findings are preliminary and based on a small convenience sample.*

Originality *– Given England's position as a relatively extreme example of high-autonomy-high-accountability quasi-market school reforms this article provides valuable insights on school autonomy and curriculum innovation that can inform policy and practice more widely.*

Introduction

The current context for school autonomy and curriculum innovation in England can be characterised in terms of policy freedoms (autonomy) and structural constraints (accountability). The policy freedoms are most significantly embedded in reforms to school organisation and governance, including the legal right that significant numbers of schools (academies and free schools) have to deviate from the National Curriculum. The constraints focus on a pervasive accountability regime, including mandatory national tests, regulated exams and a high stakes school inspection regime, all of which impose a level of standardisation and limit the potential for innovation. As a result of these quasi-market reforms England could arguably be seen as among the most extreme examples of what

Sahlberg (2012) has called the Global Education Reform Movement – GERM – making it an illustrative case for wider learning.

All schools in England – including academies and free schools – have needed to adapt their curricula to some extent to reflect the new National Curriculum introduced from 2014. This is because the new curriculum is impacting on the design of the national tests and exams that are used to hold schools accountable. As we discuss below, the new National Curriculum aspires to be both more content-rich – with very few nods towards the widely held view that 21st Century learners require a more process-based curriculum that develops transferable skills – but also less prescriptive in terms of defining every aspect of what schools should cover and when. Relatively few schools appear to have used the opportunity offered by the new National Curriculum to design genuinely innovative curricula that respond to the changing needs of learners in the 21st Century. Some schools are managing to innovate their curricula, but these are by no means exclusively the academy and free schools that have the greatest policy/legal freedoms. It would appear that leadership agency by principals and their professional teams is more important than policy freedoms for securing curriculum innovation.

This paper is comprised of two sections, each offering an historical perspective on the development of contemporary contexts for development and innovation. In the first section, 'Reform as the Norm: the context for school autonomy in England', we draw on our analysis of the literature and policy documentation to set out the development of school autonomy in England. We include descriptions of the various types of school organisation. In particular we focus on the emergence of an architecture for a self-improving system that seeks to exploit opportunities for school collaboration and partnerships. In the second section, 'The Context for Curriculum Innovation: Bounded Autonomy', we draw on existing literature to describe the evolution of the national curriculum and accountability regime. We discuss the current reforms and draw on our early work with leaders on a curriculum innovation programme offered by our institution to provide commentary and analysis for evidence of forms of bounded autonomy and the experience of mandated freedoms that have become a defining feature of professionalism for school leaders. We conclude with a section reflecting on the importance of leadership agency if schools are to exploit the possibilities for innovation. In England, such agency positions school principals in forms of rebellion against the prevailing and enduring structures of compliance.

Reform as the Norm: the context for school autonomy in England

England's schools and the English school system have gone through successive waves of reform since universal primary and secondary education was established following World War Two; indeed England has been characterised as an 'extreme' example of reform hyper-activity (Gibton, 2013). While these reforms have had different objectives and approaches,

the balance of power and resources between central government, local government and schools themselves has been a perennial dynamic (Volansky, 2003). The post-war settlement was characterised as a 'national system, locally administered', with each of England's democratically elected Local Authorities largely responsible for the development of its own school system. Since the late 1980s, however, there has been a steady reduction in the influence and role of the Local Authorities, with a concomitant increase in school-level autonomy and in central government influence over schools via the funding and accountability framework (Greany, 2015c). For example, by the time of PISA 2009, schools in the UK were among the most autonomous in the world[1] (OECD, 2011, 2013 and 2014). The election of a Conservative-led (ie centre-right) Coalition in 2010 and, subsequently, a Conservative government in 2015, has seen to a further wave of radical reform, including increased school autonomy and curriculum deregulation via academies and free schools. The aim of these reforms has been to develop a 'self-improving school-led' system (DfE, 2010).

The argument for granting schools autonomy alongside parental choice of school is that it will free schools up from slow-moving bureaucracies and make them more responsive to their parent customers via quasi-markets (Institute for Government, 2012; Lubiensky, 2009). Some commentators argue that such approaches are needed now more than ever if schools are to respond to the fast-changing needs of employers and the opportunities offered by technology in a globalised economy (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013; Leadbeater and Wong, 2010). This argument assumes that granting schools autonomy will lead to increased curriculum innovation and responsiveness to changes in the wider environment. The OECD (Lubiensky, 2009) defines different types of innovation, for example in processes as well as products and distinguishing between incremental and disruptive change, but always with improvement (however measured) as the desired outcome. We reflect this thinking to define innovation as simply 'doing things differently in order to do them better'.

Our initial evidence suggests that relatively few schools in England have engaged in conscious curriculum innovation that goes beyond the minimum requirements and that examples of such innovation exist in both more and less autonomous schools. We explore why this might the case and posit that, whilst remaining an important influence, parental choice of school in England is a less powerful driver of school behaviour than centrally

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[1] The OECD's three-yearly international benchmarking study PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) asks school principals to indicate who makes decisions regarding the school: the school itself, an external authority (such as the District) or a mixture of the two. A series of questions on specific aspects of school organisation are categorised into two broad areas: i) resource allocation, including staffing and budgets; and ii) curricula and assessments. TALIS, the OECD's international survey of school staff, adopts a similar approach which broadly maps onto the PISA framework, although with a more comprehensive set of options for where decision-making right lie including, for example, the school governing board. England/UK came out as one of the most autonomous school systems in the world on both surveys in 2012.

defined accountability.   This finding differs, at least in emphasis, from Lubiensky's (2009) review of international evidence on innovation in quasi-markets for the OECD. His review also found limited levels of curriculum innovation, but identified the 'traditionalist' tendencies exerted by parental choice mechanisms as the primary cause. That said, he does observe the ability of new charter schools in the US to transpose existing pedagogical practices developed elsewhere into new communities, thereby increasing choice if not actually increasing pedagogical innovation. The difference between our findings and Lubiensky's may reflect the degree to which centralised accountability through school inspection has been used as a primary driver of improvement and control of schools in England.

The policy argument for centrally defined accountability is that it improves system performance by establishing minimum standards and ensuring that weak school performance is identified and addressed (Ehren, Perryman and Shackleton, 2014). England's accountability model is characterised by national test and exams with results made publicly available by school; minimum floor standards and success measures for school performance; and, critically, regular school inspections with clear sanctions for schools deemed to be under-performing. Our evidence suggests that England's accountability model stifles curriculum innovation and creativity on the part of school leaders, because it focusses their attention on meeting centrally-defined standards. For head teachers in England, getting a good (or, even better, Outstanding) Ofsted inspection report has arguably become an end in itself, not simply a means to increasing the proportion of aspirational parents who choose your school. This is because a weak Ofsted report could lead to the school being taken over (in which case the head teacher would in all likelihood lose their job), whilst a Good or Outstanding report leads to reduced pressure and, potentially, increased resources and prestige (Coldron et al, 2014).

Interestingly, though, it appears that there are other factors at play beyond accountability and autonomy. Some leaders – in both more and less autonomous schools in England – appear to be able to meet the needs of the accountability framework whilst at the same time innovating their curricula. Sometimes this innovation appears geared towards meeting the needs and desires of parents (who may be more or less conservative in their expectations of education), indicating the importance of quasi-market forces as Lubiensky argues (2009). Equally, though, other examples suggest that it is the values and beliefs of school leaders, coupled with their confidence and capacity for 'breaking the mould', that drives curriculum innovation, perhaps indicating that leadership agency is as important as market forces in driving innovation. Our initial evidence suggests that the existence and strength of school networks and partnerships can be a factor in bolstering these leaders' values and beliefs as well as their confidence and capacity for innovation, although evidence of an association is purely correlational. School to school collaboration may therefore be particularly important in England's 'self-improving school led' system, where the capacity of

Local Authorities and other intermediary bodies to influence and support school-level innovation has been significantly weakened (Greany, 2015c).

Top-down and bottom up reform: towards a self-improving school-led system

Following the Second World War, a system of universal primary and secondary education was established in England overseen by a small central education department working with elected Local Authorities (a 'national system, locally administered'). Prime Minister James Callaghan's 1976 'secret garden' speech ushered in the reforms that have gradually reduced the power of Local Authorities and replaced them with a centrally controlled system of largely autonomous, but accountable, schools (Greany, 2015c).

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) devolved decision making over resources and the setting of school priorities from Local Authorities to individual school Governing Bodies. These volunteer Governing Bodies were constituted with a mixture of local, parental and staff members. The ERA also introduced the notion of parental choice, meaning that parents could request places at up to three schools, with funding following the learner (meaning that successful schools attracted more resources). Alongside this move to School Based Management, schools were increasingly held accountable through a comprehensive model comprising: a mandatory National Curriculum entitlement; national tests and assessments (currently applied at the end of Key Stages 1 (age 7), 2 (age 11) and 4 (age 16)), and the creation of Ofsted (in 1991) to operate a comprehensive programme of regular inspections of all schools in England. The aims and trajectory of curriculum reform in England are discussed in more detail below, but it is important to note here that the National Curriculum introduced following 1988 was seen as a minimum entitlement for all children, rather than a detailed prescription; thus schools were encouraged to contextualise and adapt their curriculum offer within this broad entitlement. In practice, as we explore below, this school-level freedom has been significantly constrained.

The Labour (centre-left) government that was in power from 1997-2010 maintained and developed the core model of school autonomy and accountability, whilst also exerting increased pressure on schools through a series of nationally determined and funded strategies that sought to build capacity and consistency in outcomes. Implementation of these National Strategies required a significant increase in the level of infrastructure around schools at both national and local government level, for example through the creation of new national agencies (such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency - QCDA) and 'field forces' (ie teams of expert advisors tasked with challenging and supporting schools at local level). These changes were often then reinforced through changes to the accountability framework. Thus it can be seen that curriculum innovation in this period was largely centrally driven through a combination of national change programmes aimed at influencing behaviour and building capacity in schools, coupled with enforcement through

the accountability system. Alongside these top-down, universalist programmes, the Labour government did also sponsor parallel measures aimed at encouraging more bottom-up innovation: for example, the Secretary of State was given a legal Power to Innovate, which could be granted to schools that could make a legitimate case for permission to deviate from existing legal and structural requirements. Research into school leadership and curriculum innovation in this period highlighted the ways in which successful leaders both seized on the resources and funding provided by central initiatives and then adapted these to the needs of local schools and contexts (Brundrett and Duncan, 2010).

The Coalition (centre-right) government elected in England in 2010 actively worked to strip away the national and local infrastructure that Labour had built up around schools, for example by closing the QCDA and most other national agencies and by reducing funding for Local Authorities (DfE, 2010; Greany, 2015c). In place of what they saw as Labour's stifling top-down imposed change, the Coalition sought to maximise school autonomy while raising the accountability bar for schools, increasing diversity and choice for parents and reducing the role of central and local government where possible (DfE, 2010). This reform programme has been radical and widespread, affecting almost every aspect of school life (see Lupton and Thomson, 2015). It has come to be known as 'the school-improving, school-led system' (see Greany, 2014, 2015a, b and c, Greany and Scott, 2014 and Greany and Brown, 2015 for more detailed analyses of this policy).

The academies programme has been a key element of this reform. Academies are companies and charities that are funded directly by central government and are outside Local Authority (LA) control: academies are not required to follow the National Curriculum. By December 2014 there were 4,344 open academies, including over half of all secondary schools in England (HoC Education Select Committee, 2015), although around four in five schools were still maintained by their Local Authority. Successful schools are encouraged to convert voluntarily to academy status, while schools judged to be failing by Ofsted are forced to become 'sponsored academies', meaning that they are removed from LA control and run as part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT - or academy chain).

Free Schools are new academies that can be proposed and developed by parent groups and other providers that want to challenge existing provision in an area. There were just over 150 free schools open in 2014, with the Conservative government elected in 2015 planning to support a further 500 new schools. One of the objectives of the free schools policy has been to support innovative schools that address the needs and wants of parent and wider constituencies (Freedman and Meyland-Smith, 2009; Sturdy and Freedman, 2007).

School collaboration and partnerships: an emerging architecture for the self-improving system

Based on an analysis of the white paper and related documents (such as Goldacre, 2013), Greany (2014) suggests that the Coalition has had four core criteria for the self-improving system:

- Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement
- Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads
- The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve
- Government support and intervention is minimised.

The expansion of academies, directly accountable for their performance without support from a Local Authority, can be seen as a key mechanism for achieving the first of these bullet points. Equally, the removal of national agencies and Local Authorities fulfils the last point. But it is the middle two points that appear to offer the greatest promise for improvement since, if achieved, they could address some of the perceived weaknesses of existing competitive quasi-market systems by enabling the spread of effective knowledge and expertise across the system and thereby support widespread improvement.

Hargreaves considered the conditions required for a successful self-improving system in depth (Hargreaves, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). He argues that if we remove the 'middle tier' structure of LAs then we must move beyond a focus on single self-managing schools by putting in place four 'building blocks':

- clusters of schools (the structure);
- the local solutions approach and co-construction (the two cultural elements); and
- system leaders (the key people).

Hargreaves argues that clusters – or families - of schools working together in deep partnerships can realise benefits that individual self-managing schools cannot. For example, they can: meet a wider range of student and teacher needs; facilitate innovation and knowledge transfer; deal effectively with special educational needs; share capacity and manage change; achieve efficiencies of scale and build leadership capacity and succession. But Hargreaves recognises that most school partnerships are shallow and loose, meaning these benefits will not be realised. Greany (2014) has suggested that the existence of parallel policy narratives in Coalition policy makes the development of deep partnerships more, rather than less, problematic. For example, the introduction of a new free school into a local system could reduce pupil numbers in neighbouring schools, thereby making school to school partnerships more challenging due to increased competitive pressures.

However, other Coalition policies have sought to strengthen school partnerships. Key here have been policies on system leadership and school to school support, where high performing leaders have been officially designated and funded to support under-performing

schools to improve (Higham et al, 2009; Hill and Matthews, 2008). For example, the Coalition doubled the number of National Leaders of Education (NLEs) to 1000 and introduced 500 Teaching Schools. NLEs are Head teachers that are designated to work with their school leadership team to provide support to schools that are struggling. Teaching Schools are designated by the government to co-ordinate initial and continuing professional development, school to school support and Research and Development across an alliance of partner schools (Matthews and Berwick, 2013). By the end of the Coalition's time in office it could be argued that school to school support was the primary mechanism for school improvement in England (Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Earley and Higham, 2012; Education Select Committee, 2013).

Other system leadership models involve a more permanent relationship between two or more schools. Federations and Executive Heads were made possible through Labour's 2002 legislation, but it took many years for the model to reach significant scale (NCSL, 2010). Chapman and Mujis' (2009 and 2011) research for the National College indicated a positive federation effect on pupil outcomes over time, most significantly in the case of 'performance federations' (ie strong and weak schools together) and where an executive head was in place.

Academy chains have emerged rapidly as the dominant structural model for school to school support since 2010. These chains are groups of schools that are governed by a single Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), represented by a single governing board, which is accountable for the performance of the group. Most commonly the MAT is led by a single successful school that provides support to the struggling schools in the group. The Coalition has played an active role in brokering under-performing schools into academy chains: by 2014, more than half of all academies were in a chain, and more than 60% of primary academies (DfE, 2014).

Few studies are assessing the ways in which attitudes and practices are evolving on the ground as a result of these Coalition policies.[2] Research with 'well-positioned' Headteachers in England (ie from schools that are Ofsted Good or Outstanding) suggests they see the world as increasingly hierarchical – indicating the risk of a two-tier system in which the weak get weaker and the strong stronger (Coldron et al, 2014). This highlights some of the challenges and potential fractures that reside within the changes to schools policy in England.

The Context for Curriculum Innovation: Bounded Autonomy

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[2] Toby Greany is currently leading a study on the self-improving system funded by the Nuffield Foundation and CfBT

In this section of the paper we begin with a brief contextual history of curriculum reform in England, focussed on the development of a National Curriculum and significant related initiatives, in particular the development of the accountability framework. Elements of the discourse of contemporary curriculum reform are then discussed, demonstrating the dominant approach of autonomy and professional accountability. In this way we set the context for the expectations and limitations for autonomy at national and local level. We review the current debates and issues surrounding curriculum innovation in practice, sampling policy discourses and evidence from a selection of literature. In the final sections, the connections between innovation and autonomy are illuminated from analyses of surveys of leaders of academy schools. In conclusion we posit some ideas for leadership of curriculum innovation, arguing that school leaders need to be strategic and trustful as they lead a process of continuous change for improvement.

Decades of Reform: The Evolution of a National Curriculum and Accountability Regime

The idea of a National Curriculum was conceived as an entitlement for pupils, helping to ensure a consistency of provision, thereby breaking down the walls of the 'secret garden'. In practice the process of defining the Curriculum has led to a protracted and often heated debate between politicians, employers, professionals and academics about the rightful purpose and priorities for the nation's education system. The terms of this debate arguably rage between three notions of what the curriculum is for. Chris Husbands (2015) asks whether it is about:

- Passing on the best that has been thought and said (the cultural transmission model)?
- The development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience (the progressive model)?
- The development of new skills and competencies (the applied model)?

The result of these debates have been regular reviews of the curriculum. These have required teachers and school leaders to become accustomed to remodelling their plans and re-prioritising their resources to align with external requirements, with some arguing that teachers have lost the art of designing their own curricula. Critically, as outlined below, curriculum choices and decisions are constrained and shaped by other elements of the system, most significantly the mandated assessment requirements and accountability imperatives which are arguably more important to schools than the curriculum per se.

A brief history of mandated freedoms

The narrative for the establishment and subsequent development of the English National Curriculum, introduced for publicly funded schools in 1988, necessarily includes parallel and inter-related threads detailing the establishment and development of national assessment

and inspection arrangements, introduced in 1989 and 1991 respectively. The original National Curriculum was structured into discrete subjects and organised into three 'Core' subjects (Mathematics, English and Science) and several 'Foundation' subjects, including History, Geography and Art. The curriculum structure introduced the idea of age phases for pupils across the school system. For example, Key Stage One encompassed pupils in Years One and Two, aged between four and six years. Over the following decades there have been four major reviews prior to the most recent in 2011-13 (and introduced from 2014). These reviews heralded further developments, such as the introduction of a specific Early Years Foundation Framework, a curriculum organised into areas for learning - including 'communication and language' and 'physical development' - and the recommendation for Citizenship education in 1999.

When national testing at the end of each Key Stage was introduced in 1989 it was framed by the establishment of performance descriptors and prescriptive 'levels', indicating norms for performance expectations at the end of each Key Stage and against which each child would be measured though national tests and officially recognised exams.

The long-established Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) model for assessing school performance was augmented in 1991 by the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The new body introduced an Inspection Framework that prescribed the protocols, procedures and regulations for school inspection that included surveys of parental satisfaction and public reporting. Over time, a key element of the inspection regime was the use of pupil performance data as a measure of school effectiveness and successful school leadership. Pupil performance data from the national tests and exams was published nationally and transformed by commentators and the media into league tables, rating schools by summative pupil performance data. Such formats preclude the use of contextual information, although some formulations of league tables did include 'value added' scores under the Labour government.

A feature of curriculum development over the past three decades has been the introduction of supplementary elements, such as the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies after 1997. Under the New Labour government these were robustly promoted by national and local educational authorities and very well resourced. Area advisors were appointed to work with teachers for training and support to implement detailed curricular plans. Resource packs were given to schools which contained high quality equipment and detailed lesson plans. The inspection Framework directed inspectors to identify good practice that included the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies. These strategies were never statutory, but the twin imperatives of public audit in the form of Ofsted inspections and the publication of annual league tables served to compress the notions of curricular freedoms or choice at school level. This is the cultural context for more recent developments for autonomy and curriculum reform.

Current Reforms: Curriculum, Assessment and Inspection

Following the 2010 election the Coalition government announced a fundamental review of the National Curriculum along with the closure of the semi-independent national agency (the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency) that had overseen curriculum reform under the Labour government. Instead, the new curriculum would be developed by groups of experts and civil servants with close oversight from ministers. Many, though not all, elements of the new curriculum became statutory from the beginning of the 2014 academic year, with associated changes to national tests and exams beginning from 2016 onwards. As such, their impact of these changes is still unclear.

To some extent it is arguable that the Coalition's curriculum review reflected a level of consensus that Labour policies had led schools to become too focussed on getting children to pass exams, rather than enabling them to become successful learners, as this quote from the Confederation of British Industry – the main employer body – suggests (CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey, 2013):

> *The cult of relativism in schools has allowed too many young people to leave without achieving their full potential. Definitions of achievement based on GCSE performance are too narrow. There are lots of brilliant examples in the UK of schools with a clear idea of the outcomes they want their pupils to achieve and which embed that ambition for success in every aspect of school life, but too often this is driven by outstanding school leadership that rebels against the system… we need a better balance between core and enabling subjects and a focus on personal attributes and attitudes, developed as part of everything that schools do.*

The new (2014) National Curriculum for maintained schools (ie excluding academies and free schools) retains a commitment to 'a balanced and broadly based curriculum' which a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. The inclusion of text about society is new, as is the expansion of a curriculum that prepares for 'experiences' of adult life. Beyond this a number of features of the curriculum review and its outcome are worth noting. A key requirement for the review was to 'raise the bar' so that curriculum demands in England matched those in high performing jurisdictions (Gove, 2011). Thus the underpinning assumption was that the previous curriculum had been 'dumbed down' and needed to be made more academically rigorous as a way to stretch more able children but also provide 'core knowledge' for those from more deprived backgrounds (Hirsch, 1999). The new curriculum is also purportedly intended to minimise the level of prescription on schools and give them greater space to innovate. For example, the level of detail in curriculum specifications is substantially

reduced, while the framework of detailed assessment levels that had been used to assess pupil performance since the early 1990s has been removed (see below).

The new curriculum does very little to address the 21st Century Skills agenda, except in relatively minor ways such as the replacement of ICT with Computing. This is despite the fact that employers in England have identified the need for schools to develop qualities such as creativity, teamwork and adaptability (CBI/Pearson, 2013). Tim Oates, who chaired the National Curriculum review panel, argues that the 'national curriculum' is actually a framework of standards for core knowledge, and that the real 'curriculum' experienced by students in schools should be much broader (Oates, 2015). There has been minimal support for implementation of the new curriculum in schools, raising questions about how far schools will actually embrace it.

The changes to statutory assessment are radical and reflective of the Government's discourse of autonomy and accountability within a professional pedagogical framework. Going forward, as indicated above, there will be no assessment 'levels' to describe pupil performance and progress in a common national framework. New performance descriptors are to be published and, from 2015, pupils will be reported with absolute scores set as a relative measure that will include a measure of pupil progress. Schools are required to design their own 'effective assessment systems' founded on a published, national set of core principles. The main three principles, augmented by further illuminative principles, make explicit the policy support for self-improving systems. The three headline Principles for Effective Assessment (National Curriculum, 2014) are:
- Give reliable information to parents about how their child, and their child's school, is performing
- Help drive improvement for pupils and teachers
- Make sure the school is keeping up with external best practice and innovation

A new Ofsted inspection framework was introduced shortly after the 2010 election and was applied in schools from September 2011. The new framework was described as more demanding, although also simplified and focussed on a reduced number of areas. One simple change introduced in the new framework was to categorise schools that fell below the top grades (Outstanding and Good) but above the bottom grade (Inadequate) as 'Requires Improvement', rather than the previous 'Satisfactory' judgement. Schools that are considered Good or Outstanding benefit from less frequent inspections, while those that Require Improvement are visited regularly to assess their progress, followed by a re-inspection. Schools that are judged Inadequate are likely to be brokered to become sponsored by an academy chain, meaning the Governing Body and Head teacher might well be replaced.

This summary of reform, both over decades and in more recent years, makes explicit the context of mandated freedoms, or bounded autonomy. In the following section, we discuss some issues reflecting current debates focussed on curriculum development and include voices from the field, heard from participants on a course designed to encourage curriculum innovation.

Perspectives on curriculum innovation from schools

A major theme within the current discourse for curriculum development is the invitation to all schools to review their curriculum offer to students in a way that reflects their locality. This can include community, topography, history, the built environment and cultural features. The following section is informed by interviews with school leaders participating on the Grand Curriculum Design programme - a professional development course offered by the Institute of Education and RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce). It aims to "provide curriculum leaders with the knowledge and skills required to design curricula that are flexible, innovative and responsive to the needs of each school's students and communities."[3] The interviewees are therefore self-selecting and it can be assumed that they are more engaged in thinking on curriculum innovation than the average.

School colleagues on the programme expressed their frustrations with perceived constraints and boundaries. One secondary school teacher described the directive nature of the curriculum as a series of impositions: '*We've got to do this, we've got to do this, we've got to do that*'. His reflections on the course – which aimed to encourage more autonomous thought - was somewhat dejected: '*Here, blue sky thinking, go back and it's teach and mark*'. There was a strong sense of the structural constraints in the current system with three teachers each bemoaning perceived limitations:

- '*We might question compartmental subjects, but what about the staff and faculty arrangements?*
- '*We're stuck in time frames, curriculum subjects and curriculum leadership, we're in shackles.*'
- '*We struggle with the tyranny of the syllabus.*'

Another colleague was struck by the thought that '*we're so busy providing education for the children, we're not really thinking about the children*'.

Alternative voices expressed an appreciation of the freedoms and choices available. In particular, there was a strong theme of collaboration with the students to co-construct appropriate pathways through a curriculum offer that best suited an individual's needs. This

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[3] See https://www.ioe.ac.uk/study/87077.html accessed 2/11/15

included a recognition that technology was a major influence on creativity and individual learning. The teachers' comments in this regard were characterised by the expression of professional efficacy and autonomy:

- *'Whatever the curriculum is, our students will make it theirs.'*
- *'We look for the optimum point of choice.'*
- *'We plan a creative curriculum when for accountability we weave the desirable characteristics in.'*
- *'We are being more creative about how to teach the specification.'*
- *'The idea of us learning from them (ie the children) as much as them learning from us is really important. And we shouldn't be scared of it.'*
- *'The content is not the learning, the learning is what is going on when you respond to the learning.'*
- *'Our children are orbiting around the content.'*

Curriculum innovation: structure and agency in local contexts

The issue of involving students in curriculum development is currently apposite. These teachers demonstrate a collaborative approach that is constrained by structures and pre-existing systems. Children are viewed as an essential part of the process: 'To fail to canvas the opinion of children and to listen seriously to what they were saying would be missing an important opportunity' (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014: 123). Arguably, recent policy directives have recognised the significance of the agency of pupils and teachers. In the notion of a curriculum offer that is local and bespoke there is an aspiration for such agency, although this requires motivation and engagement (Wyse, 2014).

> *Education has become intervention, something that is delivered and imposed, rather than a process that links children's needs and interests with community and society hopes for their future citizens.* (Wyse, 2014: 1)

The dilemma for teachers of how to determine the scope of their professional autonomy within prescribed conditions, be they real or perceived, has been termed a crucial one (Wermke and Hostfalt, 2014). It is a 'tension between their work as professional practitioners in the classroom, and their dependence on organisational structures, such as school and curriculum' (Wermke and Hostfalt, 2014:60). In this perspective, agency and a sense of self efficacy is important. This can be imagined at the individual, school or system level. Arguably, 'autonomy conditions agency, but also needs pre-requisites of agency in order to exist' (Wermke and Hostfalt, 2014:62).

The issue of the extent of a local, school based curriculum and the significance of a reputable core National Curriculum has been articulated by a leading academic on curriculum matters as a matter of balance and professionalism: 'Both the National

Curriculum and each school curriculum should embody teachers' common knowledge and act like the leading edge knowledge of any professional field' (Young, 2014: 5).

There is some evidence that curriculum reform in the primary sector in England is more culturally acceptable and structurally feasible. A recent report on a project focussed on leading curriculum innovation in primary schools described innovative practice that was informed by effective leadership of change (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014). As such, it was viewed as a process. This innovative process featured examples of collaboration within and between schools, the explicit inclusion of all staff in decision making and professional development, and the use of existing structures for monitoring and review. There was a requirement for an 'ethos of change' to be created by the leadership, one which 'allows freedom for experimentation, supported risk-taking and the trialling and piloting of cross curricula approaches to teaching' (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014:5). In particular, the authors reported that the primary principals welcomed curriculum development initiatives because 'they view the leadership of learning as central to their role' (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014:5). The process was complex and culturally contingent, requiring 'a good fit' with the school's particular context. Brundrett and Duncan represent this leadership practice as a Model for Curriculum Innovation which is a four stage process: Researching, including 'environment scanning in which leaders use their knowledge and judgement of their complete environment to plan bespoke initiatives; Ethos Building; Trialling; and Implementation. In this way the change is both evolutionary and dynamic and led as 'an integrated, multi-faceted and whole school activity' (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014:9). The authors stress the particular nature of primary schools and their leaders as a key feature: 'The community-focussed nature of successful primary schools means that primary school leaders are at the forefront of curriculum innovation' (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014:9).

Curriculum innovation and school autonomy in England

A key question that follows from the sections above is whether the supposedly more autonomous schools in England – in particular the academies that are not subject to the National Curriculum – are making use of their freedoms to innovate in terms of the curriculum? As yet, the evidence suggests they are not. A survey of academy leaders by The Schools Network and Reform (2012) indicated that the opportunity for 'educational autonomy' and 'freedom to innovate to raise standards' was a significant reason behind schools choosing to become academies (71% and 57% of respondents, respectively). However, only 31% reported that they had actually made some changes and a further 31% planned to do so. 39% believed that the National Curriculum 'already allows them sufficient freedom'. The authors conclude that 'simply giving schools more autonomy does not ensure that they will innovate and improve' (Bassett et al, 2012:7). They looked ahead to greater lateral accountability in which 'Schools will get to know one another in depth,

allowing them to get a much more detailed picture of what is happening than Ofsted can achieve or performance tables can reflect' (Bassett et al., 2012:7).

A later report from the same sources analysed a second survey of academy school leaders in which 51% reported 'a general sense of educational autonomy' but only 35% have, or planned, a varied curriculum. The authors of this second report conclude that 'Academies are not fully capitalising on the freedoms they have over the curriculum' (Finch et al., 2014:18). Reviewing this and other evidence, the Academies Commission report (2013) found that the 'use of the specific academy freedoms has not been widespread' (see also National College, 2011).

One interpretation of why innovation is not yet happening – or, at least, not happening at significant scale - may simply be that schools need more time. The Department for Education's 2014 annual report on academies and a recent DfE survey (DfE, 2014a and 2014b) include a number of case studies of academies that have used their freedoms, perhaps indicating that change will simply take time to feed through. However, the most recent evidence – from the OECD's TALIS survey conducted in 2013 - does not suggest that the government's efforts to increase autonomy and reduce government interference have yet fed through successfully. The report on the findings from England states that:

> *English headteachers clearly have more autonomy than heads in many other countries and yet they also are more likely to identify excessive government regulation as a barrier* (Micklewright et al, 2014)*.*

A different angle on this is to ask whether school leaders feel confident and able to initiate and drive bottom up change, especially after 25 years of top down imposed change? As the previous sections have shown, the role of external accountability plays a dominant role in determining the priorities for school leaders in England, so it takes a particularly brave or maverick Head teacher to try out anything that risks failure in the eyes of Ofsted.

Earley and Higham's review of the school leadership landscape for the National College (Earley et al, 2012) assessed progress and leadership perspectives just as many of the key policies described above were in their early stages. The research indicated that the system was becoming more fragmented although, interestingly, most leaders were confident about how they would manage change. The researchers identified four categories of head teachers – confident, cautious, concerned and constrained - based on a latent class analysis of responses to a national survey, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Four categories or classes of headteachers based on their responses to a national survey

Classes	N	%	Thematic definition	Categorization
Class 1	183	22%	Positive about school autonomy and confident about actively pursuing new policy opportunities	Confident
Class 2	286	34%	Moderately positive about school autonomy, but cautious about engaging with policy	Cautious
Class 3	264	32%	Apprehensive about school autonomy and concerned about the potential impacts of policy	Concerned
Class 4	100	12%	Neutral on school autonomy, but sceptical about the aims and constraints of policy and negative about the potential impacts	Constrained

This indicates differential levels of confidence among Head teachers. Whilst the characteristics of the schools in each group were not clear cut, there was a preponderance of schools with Good and Outstanding Ofsted judgements and early academy converters in the first two categories above. Thus it may be that curriculum innovation in a self-improving school system will be driven by a subset of schools: the confident schools that sit at the top of their local hierarchies and that are keen to differentiate themselves and remain attractive to more demanding middle class parents in a quasi-market system. The question then is whether such innovation will be proven effective and replicable and whether it will 'trickle down' to be implemented more widely?

Equally, innovation may come from more disruptive places (Leadbeater and Wong, 2010). For example, the new Free Schools that have been explicitly set up to challenge existing providers and provide new curricula and pedagogical models. There are examples of free schools that have explicitly sought to do this through both high traditionalist and highly innovative approaches. For example, the West London Free School offers a 'a classical – knowledge-based - curriculum, including compulsory Latin up to the age of 14', perhaps as a way to attract parents that might otherwise prefer a private education. By contrast, School21 has set out to offer 'new ways of teaching for the 21st Century' aimed at developing a set of six attributes: Eloquence, Grit, Professionalism, Spark, Craftsmanship and Expertise. One early study of free schools did not indicate that this level of innovation had been widespread, although it also reviewed the government-sponsored development of new vocational schools – known as University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools – which arguably reflect a more radical innovation in the system (Dunford et al, 2012). Certainly, right wing supporters of free schools remain concerned that the majority have been

prevented from innovating as much as they might by the straightjacket of school inspections (Waldegrave and Simons, 2014).

Yet even if single schools do prove effective at innovating in their curricula, there is a related question of whether or not such innovations will be scaled up to secure wider benefits across England's 21,000 schools. In both the government's and David Hargreaves' thinking, as set out above, such scale up should come through lateral sharing via school partnerships in a self-improving system, but there are significant questions about the capacity of such partnerships to secure the improvement required (Gu et al, 2014). An interesting example of this challenge is the teaching of Chinese, which has arisen as a new policy priority in the UK, but a difficult one to address at the level of individual schools (and even school partnerships) given the paucity of existing teachers or resources. Tinsley and Board (2014) researched the development of Chinese teaching in schools across the UK. They identified just 95 primary schools in England that are teaching Chinese – which equates to around 1 in 160 – while in Scotland they identified 119 such primary schools - equating to around 1 in 16. The researchers are clear that Scotland's clear strategic plan for addressing issues such as teacher training and its support for implementation in schools through Local Authority hubs is part of that country's apparent success, especially compared to England's laissez faire 'self-improving' approach.

Rebels against the System: Leadership Agency and Curriculum Innovation

This article has explored some of the tensions and unintended consequences when policy freedoms (school autonomy) are pitched against structural constraints (accountability) in the English school system. Understanding these tensions is important, since policy makers around the world are widely advised that school autonomy balanced by autonomy will lead to improved outcomes (OECD, 2015). Indeed, the tensions between autonomy and accountability have been described as 'part of the human condition and the political and economic environments of public education' (Bogotch, 2014: 319).

Proponents of quasi-markets argue that leaders and teachers in autonomous schools will have a stronger sense of agency than their peers in more centrally regulated schools, where agency implies both an intrinsic motivation to find ways to improve outcomes for the children in their care and an ability to do something about it. As a result, it is argued, leaders and teachers in autonomous schools will innovate more rapidly and more efficiently than their centrally regulated peers, leading to faster rates of improvement (Lubienski, 2009). Over the past thirty years or so this initial, purist economic view has been tempered somewhat by the experience of school systems that have adopted quasi-market reforms with minimal accountability oversight but seen minimal improvement as a result (Wylie, 2013), and also by the findings from PISA which indicate that autonomy must be married with accountability if it is to secure improvement.

Our findings suggest that for many, if not most, schools in England, accountability constraints trump autonomy freedoms. School leaders feel compelled to focus on the demands of the accountability regime, rather than on their own vision of an appropriate curriculum for their school's context, and/or the expressed preferences of parents and students. As a result, it is only where leaders have higher than average agency that they are able to manage the demands of accountability whilst at the same time innovating their curricula. Such agency appears to depend on the skills, capacity and confidence of leaders – including, presumably, an appetite for risk - to shape an alternative and innovative curriculum in the face of structural constraints. In the words of the CBI, leaders who have the courage and determination to do this remain 'rebels against the system'. Capacity and confidence may be affected by individual experience, skills and values, but also seem to be influenced by the extent to which the institution and its staff remain professionally connected to other innovative schools that can provide ideas, mutual support and challenge.

Importantly, greater structural freedom (in the form of the increased autonomies given to academies and free schools) does not seem to correlate with increased levels of innovation. Whilst our data are not comprehensive, it appears that the less autonomous LA maintained schools are equally likely to innovate and the example of teaching Chinese in England and Scotland suggests that more structured systems may actually be more, rather than less, innovative. Again, whilst we cannot say this with confidence based on our data, it may be that the more innovative schools are often the higher performing ones, putting them in Earley and Higham's 'Confident' bracket; not least since such schools are given greater freedom within England's accountability framework through less frequent inspections.

This leads us to two conclusions, both of which have implications for policy, practice and research.

The first is that we need a more nuanced understanding of accountability. Vertical accountability – i.e. to government – appears to have both a coercive and normative power over school leaders, in that it requires them act in certain ways (backed by rewards and sanctions) and also ingrains a sense that this is the 'only way to do things'. But that same vertical accountability may also have a normative impact on parents, telling them that only the qualifications that government deems important are worthy of consideration and that only the schools that Ofsted deems high quality are worth of choosing for their children. Thus vertical accountability may condition market accountability – i.e. to parents – so that they require one and the same thing from schools – high test scores and good Ofsted judgements. In the process, innovation appears to become an unintended casualty.

The second conclusion is that we need a more nuanced notion of autonomy. Essentially we see two forms of autonomy. The first we call 'structural autonomy': this describes the extent to which the legal/policy framework formally delegates decision making powers to school boards and/or leaders in two areas: resources (eg budgets/staffing) and

curriculum/pedagogy. These areas align completely with the definitions used in international benchmarking studies such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Study). The second we call 'professional autonomy', which has some parallels with Hargreaves and Fullan's notion of Professional Capital (2012). Professional Autonomy reflects a view that autonomy is as much about the confidence, capacity and effectiveness of school leaders and teachers and the trust placed in them by district and national officials as it is about formal delegated powers (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2010; Ehren et al., 2014).

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