

# *School Leadership and Professional Autonomy*

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## ABSTRACT

School autonomy remains an elusive term in research, policy and practice as does the role of the leader under its various manifestations. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the issues and describe new perspectives and important breakthroughs that may help manage if not resolve some of the associated tensions.

This paper draws on two sets of studies. The first culminated in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools conducted in 2007 in Australia, China, England, Finland, United States and Wales and funded jointly by the Australian Government and Welsh Assembly Government. Findings were reported by Caldwell and Harris (2008).

The second was part of the International Study on School Autonomy and Learning, conducted from 2014 to 2017 by teams of researchers from Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Israel and Singapore. While selected findings are reported here, accounts of developments in the six countries are contained in a special issue of the *International Journal of Educational Management* (2016). The Australian contribution was supported by funds from the Australian Government and was conducted in two stages (1) 2014 and 2015 (Caldwell, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) and (2) 2017 (Caldwell, 2018).

The article deals with (1) reframing leadership as capital formation; (2) refocusing to emphasise professional autonomy rather than structural autonomy; (3) leadership roles in different national contexts; (4) school leadership, professional autonomy and curriculum; and (5) preparation and professional learning of leaders in high-performing countries.

**Key words:** leadership, professional and school autonomy, transformation.

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*Leadership as capital formation*

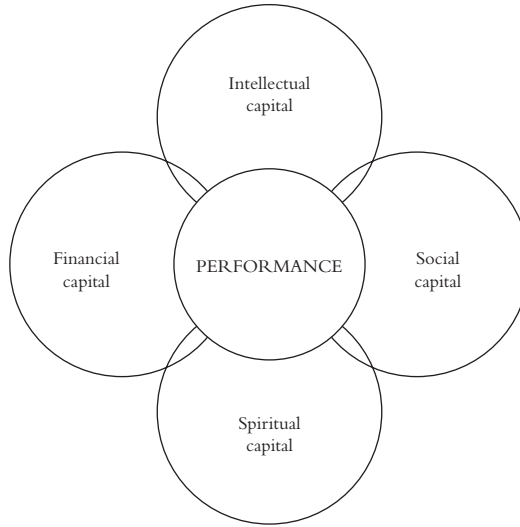
The International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools in 2007 was guided by a framework illustrated in Figure 1 which emerged from three years of field work in eleven countries from 2004. Approximately 2,500 school and school system leaders responded in workshops (60), case studies (49) and master classes (4) to questions on the design, implementation, issues and outcomes of efforts to achieve the transformation of schools. A computer-based technology was used to gather and analyse more than 10,000 responses. Details of the methodology are contained in Caldwell and Harris (2008: 10–12).

Transformation was defined in these and subsequent studies as ‘significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings’ (Caldwell and Harris, 2008: viii). The framework in Figure 1 reflected the conclusion in the field studies that ‘schools that have been transformed or have made good progress to transformation are adept at strengthening and aligning four forms of capital: intellectual capital, social capital, spiritual capital and financial capital, achieving this strength and alignment through outstanding governance’ (Caldwell and Harris, 2008: 10).

Intellectual capital refers to the level of knowledge and skill of those who work in or for the school. This is closely related to the concept of ‘professional capital’ (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Social capital refers to the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school and all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that have the potential to support and be supported by the school. Social capital contributes to professional capital and is closely related to spiritual capital that refers to the strength of moral purpose and the degree of coherence among values, beliefs and attitudes about life and learning (for some schools, spiritual capital has a foundation in religion; in other schools, spiritual capital may refer to ethics and values shared by members of the school and its community). Financial capital refers to the money available to support the school. Governance is the process through which the school builds its intellectual, social, financial and spiritual capital and aligns them to achieve its goals. Effective leadership is a pre-requisite for effective governance. The principal (headteacher) and other leaders in the school community have important roles to play.

Attention was given in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools to secondary schools, mostly in the state or

**Figure 1: Alignment of different forms of capital  
(adapted from Caldwell and Harris, 2008: 11)**



aided sectors, in countries where there was a relatively high degree of school autonomy within a centrally determined framework. In each instance case studies were conducted in six schools that had been transformed in recent times or had sustained their success over many years, with a focus wherever possible on schools in challenging circumstances. These criteria are included in 'performance' in Figure 1. The research team in each country selected schools according to these criteria and were guided by a set of fifty indicators – ten for each form of capital and of governance – in organising its analysis. These indicators were generated in the field studies described above.

Studies in Wales were conducted by David Egan, director of the Wales Institute of Applied Education Research at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC). Schools in case studies were Barry Comprehensive School, Cardiff High School, Glyncoed Comprehensive School, St Joseph's Catholic High School and Treorchy Comprehensive School. Egan concluded in the following terms:

These case study schools have used each of the available forms of capital to become high-achieving schools that add considerable value to the performance of

their students, and enable the schools to achieve at much higher levels than similar schools in Wales. They do so, however, in an individual way that aligns their particular contexts, moral purpose and theory of action through the governance system in the school. (Egan, 2008: 36)

In some ways the findings in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools suggested a breakthrough in knowledge about school leadership as it stood in 2008. At least they offered a different lens through which to view leadership: they complemented, extended and in some respects enriched other frames or lenses.

Our work in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools suggests that greater account should be taken of the four forms of capital and the importance of good governance to ensure that the goals of the school are achieved. Expressed another way, the point we have reached in the meta-analyses of studies of leadership [in 2008] has yielded necessary knowledge but it is not yet sufficient. (Caldwell and Harris, 2008: 145)

*A more nuanced understanding of autonomy*

The International Study on School Autonomy and Learning was conducted from 2014 to 2017 by teams of researchers from Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Israel and Singapore. Questions addressed in the Australian contribution in 2014 and 2015 were:

1. Why are there mixed results in research on the links between school autonomy and student achievement?
2. What is it that schools actually do with a higher level of school autonomy when they take action that leads to gains in student achievement?
3. Why is it that some critics or sceptics about school autonomy advocate approaches to school improvement that assume or require schools to have a relatively high degree of autonomy?
4. How important is a higher level of school autonomy when all of the forces that may help achieve gains in student achievement are taken into account?
5. Is a higher level of school autonomy likely to foster innovation of a kind that will yield benefits to the student and the nation, especially in the development of new approaches to learning in the 21st century?
6. How important is school leadership and how may principals and other school leaders be prepared for and supported in their roles?
7. What is the role of the school system in encouraging and supporting a higher level of school autonomy?

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8. Where is the profession heading for principals and other school leaders if trends to higher levels of school autonomy are sustained and new approaches to learning are developed?

(Caldwell, 2016a: 1–2)

Responses to all questions were assisted by a review of related literature but an important aspect of the methodology was a set of five case studies conducted in three systems in Australia (Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and Victoria) in schools nominated by senior officials as having had a higher level of school autonomy for at least two years, had shown noteworthy improvement in student achievement, and there was confidence that the schools could explain in cause-and-effect fashion how that improvement had been made. In addition to these criteria, one of the schools was selected because of its national and international reputation in addressing so-called twenty-first-century schools. Case studies were contained in Caldwell (2016a) and Caldwell (2016c). Another important aspect of the methodology was a survey of a representative sample of principals in every state and territory. Findings were contained in Caldwell (2016b) and summarised in Caldwell (2018).

Of central concern was the response to question 1. OECD has for many years reported a positive but qualified association between school autonomy and student achievement, as reflected in results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). 'Autonomy and accountability go together: greater autonomy in decisions related to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with better school performance, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability' (OECD, 2011: 4). These generalisations, while supported by the evidence in PISA, did not harmonise with experience in some countries or systems. A review of PISA results from 2000 to 2009 suggested that school autonomy had a negative influence in developing, low-performing countries but had a positive impact in developed, high-performing countries (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2012; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015).

Hanushek, Link and Woessmann drew on four waves of PISA tests involving more than one million students from forty-two countries. They estimated the effect of school autonomy from within-country changes in the average share of schools with autonomy over key elements of school operations. They summarised their findings in the following terms:

Countries with otherwise strong institutions gain considerably from decentralized decision-making in their schools, while countries that lack such strong existing structures may actually be hurt by decentralized decision-making. The negative effect in developing countries emerges most clearly in areas related to academic content, but also appears for autonomy in the areas of personnel and budgets. (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2012: 213)

*An important distinction*

It is findings like these that suggest the need for a more nuanced view of autonomy, and that is why a distinction should be made between structural autonomy and professional autonomy. The distinction proved helpful in the analysis of case studies and in the next stage of the project. These distinctions, adapted from Caldwell (2016a: 3–4), are as follows:

*Autonomy.* For state schools, autonomy refers to the decentralization from the system to the school of significant authority to make decisions, especially in respect to curriculum, pedagogy, personnel and resources, within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities.

*Structural autonomy* refers to policies, regulations and procedures that permit the school to exercise autonomy. Schools may take up such a remit in a variety of ways, or not at all, including ways that are ineffective if the intent is to improve outcomes for students. The granting of autonomy may make no difference to outcomes for students unless the school has the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference and uses that capacity to achieve this end.

*Professional autonomy* refers to teachers and principals having the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference to outcomes for students, and this capacity is exercised in a significant, systemic and sustained fashion. Professional autonomy calls for the exercise of judgement, with a high level of discretion in the exercise of that judgement.

As implied in the second question in studies conducted in 2014 and 2015 (‘What is it that schools actually do with a higher level of school autonomy when they take action that leads to gains in student achievement?’), case studies were conducted to demonstrate how this was accomplished. This approach was consistent with what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) referred

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to as building ‘case law’ in education, in this instance as it relates to the exercise of professional capital or professional autonomy.

In each case, schools made learning the unrelenting focus of their work, especially in the foundation areas of literacy and numeracy, but also for a broader range of goals that the schools and their jurisdictions had set. The role of the principal was paramount, especially in aligning the efforts of all staff. Data were used in skilful fashion to identify needs, and teachers and other professionals worked together, usually in teams, to work out strategies to address priorities among them. Without exception, these schools acted to build the capacity of staff to do what their knowledge and understanding had said they should do. Most of these actions were consistent with what research tells us works as far as effective leadership and school improvement are concerned. ‘The autonomy premium’ (the title of Caldwell, 2016a) was achieved when schools used their capacity to select staff who were committed to what schools were attempting to do in their different contexts, and who already possessed the knowledge and skills, or at least were on the way to possessing them. Strategic resourcing was also a factor in achieving the ‘premium’ because schools had control over a much larger portion of the budget for running their schools than they had in the past and were adept at deploying their needs-based funding according to local priorities. These ‘premium’ capacities were also evident in the school that was outstanding in the way it was addressing twenty-first-century skills. The evidence in four schools suggested that schools could turn themselves around relatively quickly, but in a fifth, there had been an evolutionary approach to being at the forefront of new technologies and pedagogies over several decades.

#### *Professional autonomy in the self-improving school system*

Professional autonomy may be understood as a pre-condition for a self-improving school system (SISS), as suggested by David Hargreaves in one of four ‘think pieces’ on SISS he wrote for the formerly titled National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services (now the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL)) in England (Hargreaves, 2010). He considered that the self-managing school (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988), that assumes a relatively high level of professional autonomy, was a forerunner of SISS, but the latter goes further because it calls for a capacity of schools to work together through heads and other school leaders acting as ‘system leaders’.

Today's system leaders are a direct product of successful leadership of self-managing schools. A major task for school leaders in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be the development of the *self-managing school system*. Achieving this status is likely to be a precondition of becoming a *self-improving system*. (Hargreaves, 2010: 12; emphasis in original)

Hargreaves also considered self-improvement to extend the process of school improvement. Indeed, it may be argued that a capacity for professional autonomy may be a pre-condition for success in school improvement and, beyond that, in school self-improvement.

*Professional autonomy in high-performing countries*

The questions addressed in the Australian contribution in 2017 (Caldwell, 2018) emerged from issues that surfaced in the earlier contribution described above.

1. How have high-performing jurisdictions achieved strategic alignment across different levels of government when formulating and implementing policy to improve student performance?
2. What role is played by a higher level of school autonomy, especially professional autonomy, in achieving this alignment?
3. How have principals and teachers exercised professional autonomy to build a capacity for transformational change?
4. What approaches to the preparation and professional development of principals and teachers have proved effective in systems where higher levels of autonomy have been extended to schools?
5. What factors have constrained efforts to achieve transformational change as efforts have been made to improve performance?

The first question was addressed through a study of strategic alignment in thirteen countries: #Australia, \*#Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario), \*China (Hong Kong), #England, \*Estonia, \*\*Finland, Germany, Israel, \*\*Japan, \*#Korea (South), New Zealand, \*\*Singapore and the #United States of America. Seven of the thirteen are in the top ten of performers on either PISA 2015 or TIMSS 2015 (\*). Four are federations, nine have unitary government. Eight (#) were selected for study in response to the fourth question. Except for Australia, information was gathered from a range of documents from many sources. Information for

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Australia was gathered from related documents and interviews with senior officers in five of the six states (Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia).

### *Limitations*

There are limitations in studies that involve such methodologies. One relates to the use of international tests of student achievement such as PISA and TIMSS if it is claimed that these are the best indicators of quality in outcomes for students. They were not claimed to be in the research described in this article. It is acknowledged that they focus on literacy and numeracy, with a problem-solving dimension, especially in PISA. They do not test the outcomes of rote learning nor do they deal with creativity and achievement in the arts. However, in policy terms, due weight should be given to the high rates of participation, being seventy-two countries/economies in the case of PISA.

There are pitfalls in international comparative studies if account is not taken of context. In the study reported here, sixteen benchmarks were derived, but these were not policies and practices that constituted best practice but were dimensions on which comparisons could be made proving context was specified. Examples are cited in the next section in the further analysis of Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) data.

Finally, reference is made later in the article to where various countries sit on an index of school autonomy. It is acknowledged that the index is derived from principals' assessments in PISA 2015 (OECD, 2016a). Different assessments may have been made if ratings were made by system personnel or teachers.

### *A deeper understanding of professional autonomy*

A deeper understanding of professional autonomy, or further 'nuancing', was obtained through an analysis of results in PISA 2015. These results formed part of studies in relation to questions 1 to 3 (above) as they related to the association between autonomy, especially professional autonomy, and learning.

The OECD published five volumes in its report on PISA 2015. Volume I is the most widely quoted because it contained a detailed examination of

student performance in scientific literacy. Reports for each country are published separately. Volume II provided an analysis of policies and practices for successful (high-performing) schools based on information gathered from students and principals. Attention is given here to analyses reported in Volume II (OECD, 2016a) where the focus was on the performance of Year 8 students in science.

On the matter of autonomy, Volume II noted that PISA 2015 provided ‘a more nuanced picture’ of the relationship between autonomy and performance. In particular, ‘students score higher in science when principals exercise greater autonomy over resources, curriculum and other policies, but especially so in countries where achievement data are tracked over time or posted publicly more extensively or when principals show higher levels of educational leadership’ (OECD, 2016a: 230–1).

The report contained a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the relationships between school autonomy and student performance (OECD, 2016a: 110–50). Several levels of government were included when principals were invited to describe how education is governed (teachers, principals, the school’s governing board, the regional or local education authorities, the national education authority, or a combination of these). Responses were sought for several domains of decision-making: resources (appointing and dismissing teachers, determining teachers’ starting salaries and salary raises, and formulating school budgets and allocating them within the school); curriculum (choosing textbooks, deciding which courses are offered, and determining the content of courses); and student assessment, disciplinary and school admissions policies). An index of school autonomy was calculated as the percentage of tasks for which the principal, the teachers or the school governing body have ‘considerable responsibility’.

The highest-performing jurisdictions in science for 15-year-olds were Singapore, Japan, Estonia, Chinese Taipei, Finland, Macao (China), Canada, Vietnam and Hong Kong (China) (in descending rank order). Using Australia as the benchmark for comparison, three scored higher on the index of school autonomy: Macao, Estonia and Hong Kong. The same three have more autonomy for school resources. Hong Kong, Japan and Estonia have more autonomy for curriculum; Hong Kong more autonomy for policy on school assessment; and Japan more autonomy on student admissions (OECD, 2016a: 115–19).

In general, there were statistically significant and positive correlations between level of school autonomy and performance in science. There were

statistically significant and negative correlations between performance and decisions made by a national education authority in the areas of resources, curriculum, disciplinary policies and assessment policies (OECD, 2016a: 120). There were no statistically significant differences between level of school autonomy and equity in science performance. Some were positive, some negative but not statistically significant for all levels of governance except a statistically significant and positive correlation for discipline policies set by a national authority (OECD, 2016a: 120).

Students performed better in science when principals were more autonomous, especially in countries where measures on an index of educational leadership were higher than the OECD average. 'Schools are expected to benefit more from greater autonomy when their principals are prepared for the role' (OECD, 2016a: 121). The positive association between principal autonomy and student performance was stronger in countries where students were assessed in standardised tests because there are 'fewer risks' if outcomes are regularly monitored.

There are differences in patterns of school governance among jurisdictions within countries, but the OECD reports are for whole countries. There was no distinction in the analysis between approaches in public and private schools. Above all, the relationships are correlational not causal.

The findings are important because they highlight the association between student achievement under conditions of professional autonomy and school leadership, especially when principals are prepared for the role. This association holds up across different national contexts, even when there are differences in functions over which schools have responsibility.

### *New insights from TALIS*

In late 2016 OECD published an analysis of data gathered in its 2013 TALIS. Interest in 2016 was the impact of school leaders on the nurturing of professional learning communities and the environment for learning; it was not a broad-based study of school leadership or of the impact of school leaders. However, to the extent that professional learning communities are important for high-performing schools – and the evidence suggests that they are – the report is of considerable interest.

Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at OECD, wrote the foreword and included the following statement that contained a broad view of what effective leaders do and it captures the essence of professional

autonomy. To have an impact on performance, school leaders need to adapt curriculum to local needs, build capacity for professional learning and have autonomy in:

setting strategic direction, and the ability to develop school plans and monitor progress towards goals, using data to improve practice. They also need to have a say in who gets hired as teachers to improve the match between candidates and their school's needs [and] participate in networks of schools to stimulate and spread innovation. (OECD, 2016b: 3)

The report defined certain terms that are helpful in describing what school leaders do when they adopt different styles or orientations to their work. The starting point was to describe instructional leadership and distributed leadership, each of which is considered important in creating a professional learning community and nurturing a favourable climate in support of student learning. *Instructional leadership* 'comprises leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, co-ordination and improvement of teaching and learning'. *Distributed leadership* is 'a reflection of leadership being shown by the principal, but also of others acting as leaders in school' (OECD, 2016b: 15). Four types (styles, orientations) were described:

- *Integrated leaders* are attentive to both instructional and distributed leadership in their schools and spend considerable time on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks;
- *Inclusive leaders* engage staff, students and their parents or guardians in decisions at the school, but relatively less often take up a role as instructional leaders and spend less time on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks;
- *Educational leaders* are strongly engaged in instructional leadership, but much less in involving stakeholders in decisions;
- *Administrative leaders* spend a large portion of their time on school management and administrative issues and are, as a result, less engaged in distributed and instructional leadership activities than integrated leaders. (adapted from OECD, 2016b: 15)

Table 1, adapted from OECD (2016b: 38), contains the distribution of leadership types as reported by principals in TALIS 2013 for ten of the thirteen countries given attention in the Australian study reported here (Germany and Hong Kong did not participate; there were insufficient responses from the United States). Two sub-national jurisdictions are

**Table 1: Principals’ engagement in instructional leadership activities in lower secondary education (percentage of principals reporting ‘very often’ or ‘often’ as reported in TALIS 2013) (adapted from OECD, 2016b: 40)**

<i>Country/ Jurisdiction (10 of 35)</i>	<i>Integrated (%)</i>	<i>Educational (%)</i>	<i>Inclusive (%)</i>	<i>Administrative (%)</i>
Australia	61.5	26.8	11.3	0.5
Estonia	11.3	1.0	76.4	11.3
Finland	2.3	9.2	14.7	73.8
Israel	9.7	82.6	3.3	4.4
Japan	15.1	76.9	None reported in this category	8.1
Korea	91.1	8.1	0.8	None reported in this category
New Zealand	25.1	69.5	0.7	4.7
Singapore	62.6	36.1	0.7	0.7
Alberta (Canada)	73.6	22.2	3.8	0.4
England (UK)	32.5	63.4	None reported in this category	4.1
OECD average	45.9	23.8	19.4	10.9

included: Alberta (Canada) and England (UK). There are important differences among patterns of response illustrated, for example, for top performers in PISA 2015. The dominant patterns are Singapore (62.6 per cent reported integrated leadership), Estonia (76.4 per cent reported inclusive leadership), Japan (76.9 per cent reported educational leadership), Korea (91.1 per cent reported integrated leadership) and Finland (73.8 per cent reported administrative leadership). However, considering all ten countries or jurisdictions listed in Table 1, all but two have a dominant pattern of either integrated leadership (4) or educational leadership (4).

While the OECD drew attention to these and other differences in various analyses, it is important to go beyond these observations to explain exceptions, for there are implications for professional preparation and development. Consider, for example, the case of high-performing Finland where Table 1 indicates that the dominant style of leadership is

administrative (73.8 per cent of respondents), indicating that principals see themselves mainly as engaged in management and administrative matters. An explanation may lie in the capacities of teachers themselves to engage in the listed activities due to the universally recognised strength of initial teacher education and the high level of trust that principals have in their teachers. It may not be necessary, or it may not be a high priority for principals or would-be principals to prepare themselves or engage in professional development that focused on related aspects of instructional leadership. The other exception to the general pattern is Estonia, where inclusive leadership was the dominant type, that is, the focus is more on engagement of stakeholders in decision-making. This may be explained by the structure of schooling in Estonia where more than 200 municipalities control its approximately 600 schools and each school has a board of trustees and a staff council of teachers. Also, like Finland, every teacher completes a master's degree in initial preparation.

Notwithstanding the differences noted above, analysis of data revealed that most of the school leaders stated that they actively practised instructional leadership (one-third did not) and that, overall:

- Principals have only limited, and mostly indirect, influence on establishing a learning climate in their school. Learning climates are strongly dependent on teacher competencies and features of the school context;
- Specific types of leadership are more prominent in certain countries and economies than others, suggested that leadership practices are idiosyncratic to each national context. (adapted from OECD, 2016b: 16–17)

Table 2 contains a summary of responses by principals in their reports of engagement in aspects of instructional leadership for the same ten of the thirteen countries. Percentages reporting 'very often' or 'often' are listed for actions to support cooperation among teachers to develop new teaching practices, ensure teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills and ensure teachers feel responsible for their students' learning outcomes.

There is a noteworthy dichotomy among the patterns of responses. Except for Estonia, Finland and Japan, percentages are generally above the OECD averages. Expressed another way, barely one-half or fewer principals in the three exceptional cases of high-performing countries reported that they engaged in the three actions. One explanation is that they may not need to. The reasons for Estonia and Finland may be the same as

described above for Table 1: they have teachers whose initial preparation and teaching culture does not require a high priority on the part of principals. For the third of the actions included in Table 2, Finland has a deeply embedded culture in its schools in which a cadre of teachers and others are on hand to provide special assistance to ensure no child falls behind (this is what is meant by the term ‘special education’ in Finland). Up to one-third of all students require some form of ‘special education’ during the years of their basic education. In the case of Japan, ‘lesson study’ is deeply embedded in the culture of teaching. It was pioneered in Japan and ‘involves small groups of teachers meeting regularly to engage in a collaborative process of lesson planning, implementation, evaluation and refinement. Key to their work is the hypothesising of anticipated student responses, the testing of these hypotheses, and the refinement of the lesson design’ (Hollingsworth and Oliver, 2005: 1).

**Table 2: Distribution of types of leadership in lower secondary schools (percentage of principals as reported in TALIS 2013) (adapted from OECD, 2016b: 38)**

<i>Country/Jurisdiction (10 of 37)</i>	<i>Act to support cooperation among teachers to develop new teaching practices Very often/often (%)</i>	<i>Act to ensure that teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills Very often/often (%)</i>	<i>Act to ensure that teachers feel responsible for their students' learning outcomes Very often/often (%)</i>
Singapore	65.4	84.4	91.1
Alberta (Canada)	71.1	79.1	84.8
Korea	73.6	77.8	80.5
Israel	67.6	76.0	81.8
Australia	64.0	76.1	82.5
England (UK)	61.4	75.3	82.9
New Zealand	60.2	74.8	81.6
Estonia	41.3	52.0	53.0
Finland	56.6	40.0	44.0
Japan	33.9	38.9	32.6
OECD average for 36 countries	64.1	70.2	76.6

It is noteworthy in Table 2 that Singapore, the highest-performing nation in both PISA 2015 and TIMSS 2015, had the highest percentage of principals reporting their engagement in ensuring teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills and ensuring that teachers feel responsible for their students' learning outcomes.

The OECD report drew implications for policy and practice, especially in respect to the professional development of principals:

Integrated leadership, combining instructional and distributed leadership and using student outcomes to develop the school's goals, program and professional development plan, appears to be the most favourable approach to establishing such a [professional] learning community at schools. Countries and economies ... can stimulate this through training programs ... (OECD, 2016b: 17)

In summary, the further analysis of findings in TALIS suggests that there is no one universal best way for professional learning to occur that applies to all countries. It is likely, for example, based on information in Table 1, that principals would be bored or frustrated in Estonia, Finland and Japan if there was a priority on building capacities among teachers to practise what is already deeply embedded in the cultures of teaching and for which they were well prepared in initial teacher education.

#### *School leadership, professional autonomy and curriculum*

A further illustration of the links between school leadership, autonomy and professional learning lies in the field of curriculum, which was one of the functions that contributed to the Index of Autonomy calculated from responses of principals, as described earlier in the paper in OECD work associated with PISA 2015 (for 15-year-olds hence for secondary schools). Items on curriculum were concerned with deciding which courses were offered, choosing which textbooks are used and determining course content. The extent of autonomy was measured by the percentage of responses for decisions made by principals and teachers.

There was considerable diversity among rankings of the thirteen countries studied (OECD, 2016a: 116). Above the OECD average among the sixty-nine countries in the rankings for autonomy on curriculum were New Zealand (2), UK (4), Hong Kong (5), Japan (6), Estonia (8), Australia (10), Finland (11), Korea (12) and Israel (22). Below the OECD average were Germany (29), Canada (31), United States (40) and Singapore (50).

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The way in which this autonomy works out in practice was illustrated in Australia, which is above the OECD average on the index, as revealed in studies in 2014 and 2015 (Caldwell, 2016a: 24–6). In Australia a national curriculum has been developed in recent years, with early expectations that students would be taught the same curriculum no matter where they travelled in the country. The developmental work was undertaken by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

While the Australian curriculum has proceeded with relatively little adaptation in some jurisdictions, others have blended or integrated only part of the national curriculum in existing state/territory-based curriculum, with a relatively high level of further adaptation at the local level where there is a relatively high level of autonomy. These adaptations have occurred even though ministers for education, acting through the education council, have endorsed the Australian curriculum for implementation in schools across the country.

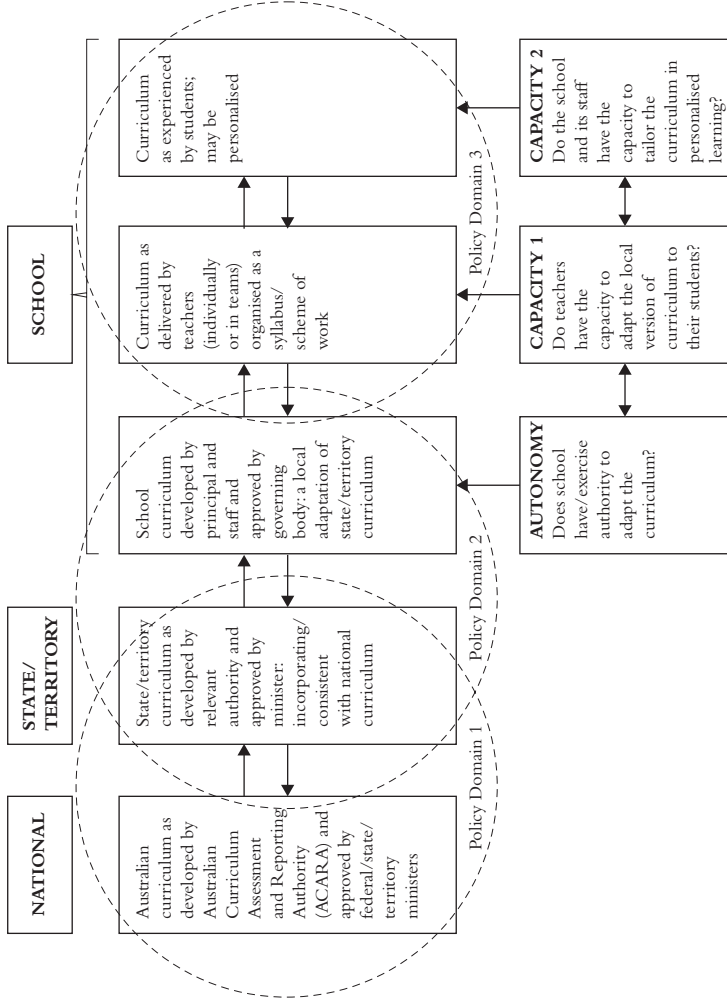
Closer examination of delivery confirms that the Australian curriculum, as such, is not necessarily manifested in the learning experience of students. Figure 2 illustrates the ‘delivery chain’, with the national curriculum incorporated in state/territory curricula, with adaptations to suit priorities in jurisdictions, with further adaptation at the school level. Teachers may then tailor experiences to the needs of their students.

Key questions are posed in Figure 2. Does the school have or exercise authority to adapt the curriculum? Do teachers have the capacity to adapt the local version of the curriculum to the needs of their students? Do the school and its staff have the capacity to tailor the curriculum in personalised learning? Affirmative answers to these questions are the essence of professional autonomy.

It may be that schools and their teachers do not make these adaptations or do the tailoring that is implied. They may lack the capacity to do so. There may be no link between school autonomy and student achievement under these circumstances. On the other hand, the level of professional autonomy that is afforded may be taken up in a way that enables the link to be made.

Affirmative responses call for action in three ‘policy domains’. Policy Domain 1 calls for states/territories to adapt or integrate the Australian curriculum to suit their circumstances. Policy Domain 2 requires them to provide schools with significant autonomy to tailor the curriculum to meet the mix of student needs and local priorities/specialisations. Policy Domain 3 requires teachers with the capacities to personalise learning and in this

Figure 2: Opportunities for professional autonomy in the Australian curriculum  
(adapted from Caldwell, 2016a: 25)



way exercise professional autonomy. A feature of Figure 2 is the provision for ‘system learning’, as indicated by the arrows from right to left. ACARA gathers information from states and territories in monitoring the implementation of the national curriculum. Schools and school systems should do the same and ‘learn’ from their experiences.

### *Preparation and professional learning in high-performing countries*

International comparative studies of approaches to preparation and professional learning are increasing in number and scope. It is striking that there is no universal one best way in these approaches. Some are standards driven, context is important and diagrammatic representations or ‘models’ differ from setting to setting. There are commonalities but Jensen et al. (2017: 1) warn that there is no formula that guarantees ‘effective leadership practices’ (Jensen et al., 2017: 1). The following summarises approaches in some of the high-performing systems (drawn from different sources and cited in Caldwell, 2018).

An international comparative study of professional learning in high-performing countries was conducted for the National Centre on Education and Economy (NCEE) in the USA by Jensen and his colleagues at Melbourne-based Learning First (Jensen, et al., 2016). They gave attention to British Columbia (Canada), Hong Kong and Shanghai (China) and Singapore. They found that each of the four systems followed a more-or-less standard school improvement cycle in professional learning: students’ current learning is assessed, evidence-based approaches are selected to plan the next stage of learning, impacts of new approaches are evaluated, and refinements are made (adapted from Jensen et al., 2016: 4). While describing the approach’s foundation in research on school improvement, the authors noted that it does not always succeed: ‘To make it effective requires a broad strategy with strong linkages between how leadership roles are structured, how resources are allocated, and the focus on evaluation and accountability measures’ (Jensen et al., 2016: 4).

The Learning First team conducted another study for NCEE, focusing this time on professional learning for school leaders in the four high-performing systems of Hong Kong, Ontario, Shanghai and Singapore (Jensen, Downing and Clark, 2017) (see also Jensen et al., 2015). The key findings reflect a high level of strategic alignment across systems and within schools. High-performing systems:

- Structure leadership development to reflect their vision for schools;
- Train leaders to manage professional learning organisations;
- Tie leadership development to problems from practice that are actionable;
- Build skills for a dynamic work environment;
- Offer programs that continue throughout a leader's career. (adapted from Jensen et al., 2017: 1–2)

Different approaches are evident in policy and practice in other countries. In high-performing Finland, the Institute of Educational Leadership was established as recently as 1999. There are no uniform requirements and regulations for the Certificate of Educational Administration: any person may undertake a programme, there are no conditions for admissions and fees are paid by the student. In contrast, the centrepiece of preparation programmes for principals in top-performing Singapore is the relatively structured Leaders in Education Program (LEP), established in 2001 and offered by the National Institute of Education at Nanyang Technological University. The LEP is a six-month full-time course for a selected cohort of thirty to forty vice-principals during which they are assigned to a school other than their own. Situational tests and interviews are employed in selection and the formation of cohorts. The principal of the assigned school serves as a mentor. A feature is the Creative Action Project that calls for participants to imagine their assigned school in ten to fifteen years' time, challenging their beliefs and assumptions and exploring new possibilities. Participants receive their full salary during the programme and course fees are met by the Ministry of Education. Participants may also undertake an overseas study visit to learn from experiences in other settings and establish a professional network. The Leaders in Education Program International (LEPI) was established in 2005 to enable participation from aspiring principals in other countries.

Developments in England are noteworthy. England leads all countries under consideration as far as school autonomy is concerned. The country is large in population and has highly diverse student demographics. While a single agency (NCTL) retains oversight of programmes for the development of school leaders, delivery is in the hands of thirty-two licensees around the country. While licensees often work in a form of partnership with universities, the latter are not the primary provider. Local authorities play little or no part, just as they have a diminishing role in the governance of schools. The key players in many instances are Multi-Academy Trusts

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(MAT). It is fair to conclude that these approaches are the most strikingly different from traditional approaches.

### *Discussion*

Much of the debate about school autonomy has focused on structural autonomy, that is, on the merit of establishing policies, regulations and procedures that permit the school to exercise autonomy. There was an assumption on the part of proponents that schools would have the necessary capacities to take up that autonomy. As research cited in this paper has demonstrated, this was not necessarily so, and there may have been no impact or schools may in fact have gone backwards if capacity and support were lacking or there was dysfunctional opportunistic behaviour by some actors. The evidence has pointed to the importance of professional autonomy being to a large extent a pre-requisite for success. To use a cliché, professional autonomy trumps structural autonomy.

There are strategies in many countries to build capacity for professional autonomy. In some instances, the idea of autonomy has not been invoked. Included here are setting standards for the principalship or school leadership in general. For example, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals has been approved by all ministers for adoption throughout the country as have the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, each developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Those for teachers include many that apply to leaders throughout the school. The term 'autonomy' may not be found in these documents yet many of the standards are in fact a requirement for professional autonomy.

### *The emerging profession of school leadership*

Many systems of education have programmes designed to build the professional capacity, often through recently established colleges, institutes or academies of school leadership. Consistent with findings in the analysis of PISA 2015 (OECD, 2016a, cited earlier), these are programmes beyond those required for initial teacher certification. There is a strong case that a profession of school leadership is emerging. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) distinguished between *being professional* and *being a professional*. While both are desirable, they pay particular attention to *being a professional*: 'Ideally, of

course, it's best to be professional and be a professional at the same time – to have status and autonomy and be trusted and able to make informed judgments effectively' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012: 81). They cited the 'classic' definition of Etzioni of what a *profession* entails:

- Specialized knowledge, expertise, and professional language;
  - Shared standards of practice;
  - Long and rigorous processes of training and qualification;
  - A monopoly over the service that is provided;
  - An ethic of service, even a sense of calling, in relation to clients;
  - Self-regulation of conduct, discipline, and dismissals;
  - Autonomy to make informed discretionary judgments;
  - Working together with other professionals to solve complex cases;
  - Commitment to continuous learning and professional upgrading.
- (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012: 80)

The findings reported in this paper are consistent with these characteristics.

### *System adaptivity*

If high levels of professional autonomy are achieved for all leaders especially principals, in what ways should systems of education change, especially when different levels of government are involved? Taking a systems' view, a major change cannot be made at the point of delivery – the school – without changes to other parts of the system. If an open systems' view is taken, as it should, how do all parts of the system respond, reaching new points of equilibrium, given external forces in society and the economy, for example, that demand a response? What can be learnt from high-performing countries?

There is international interest in how higher levels of autonomy may affect the roles of different levels of government. Indeed, an OECD study was mounted on the topic and reported in Burns and Köster (2016). Burns and Köster described increasing complexity in multi-level governance and the challenge of reaching an equilibrium. They singled out the trend to autonomy in response to demands from local actors who are increasingly diverse and well educated. More information is now available about the performance of schools and student achievement and this serves to

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empower them. Burns and Köster observed that 'Education systems are now characterised by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are to a certain extent fluid and open to negotiation' (Burns and Köster, 2016: 11). Case studies of the changing characteristics of education systems are contained in Burns, Köster and Fuster, (2016). In similar fashion, narratives for thirteen countries were constructed in 2017 and reported in Caldwell (2018) in response to the questions 'How have high-performing jurisdictions achieved strategic alignment across different levels of government when formulating and implementing policy to improve student performance?' and 'What role is played by a higher level of school autonomy, especially professional autonomy, in achieving this alignment?' While there was stability in respect to values and structural arrangements between different levels of government, there was a dynamic quality rather than inertia in efforts to achieve strategic alignment.

There is a bigger challenge for the longer term given rising expectations for schools in their contribution to society and the economy as well as to personal well-being. There are many 'unknown unknowns' in technology and globalisation. As Bentley and Wilsdon (2003: 16) argued:

In other words, we need [new] systems capable of continuously reconfiguring themselves to create new sources of public value. This means ... not searching for a static blueprint that predefines their relative weight. Instead, we need to ask *How can the system as a whole become more than the sum of its parts?*

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