

COLLABORATION-AUTONOMY-COLLABORATION: APPROACHES TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract

In this paper Peter Rudd (University of York) presents an overview of the various approaches that have been taken to support school improvement and school effectiveness in England over the last 30 or 40 years. It is argued that a previous system of collaboration, based on local education authorities supporting schools, was replaced with an emphasis on the autonomy and accountability of individual schools, followed by a return to (different forms of) collaboration. The paper considers the pros and cons of different approaches and the potential applicability of these approaches to other countries' schooling systems¹.

Keywords

autonomy, system of collaboration, approaches to school improvement, United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

The aims of this paper are twofold:

1. To provide a brief history of school improvement in the England based on a cycle of collaboration-autonomy-collaboration.
2. To discuss the pros and cons of these approaches and their potential applicability and relevance to other national schooling systems.

¹ La **presentazione** di Peter Rudd (*Università di York*) è reperibile online all'indirizzo:
http://www.slideshare.net/Indire_Ricerca/collaborationautonomycollaboration-a-history-of-school-improvement-in-the-uk.

Il **video** dell'intervento è disponibile sul canale **Youtube di Indire Ricerca**, nella *Playlist* degli interventi al *Convegno internazionale "Migliorare la scuola"* (Napoli, 14-15 maggio 2015)

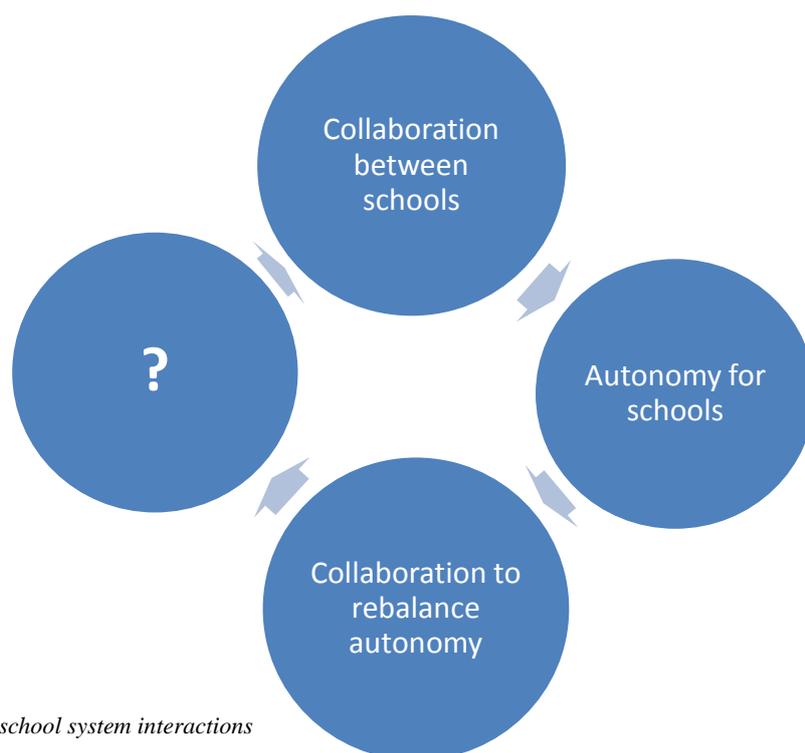


Figure 1: Cycle of school system interactions

Figure 1 above shows the suggested cycle of collaboration-autonomy-collaboration based on major policy drivers for school interactions. These three phases are described in more detail in the next section. Generally, starting at the top of the diagram, it is argued that as the school system developed, it was predominantly based on collaboration. This collaborative phase has origins in the formation of local education authorities (similar in scope to traditional English ‘counties’) by means of the Education Act in 1902, with a peak in the 1960s, extending into the 1970s and 1980s.

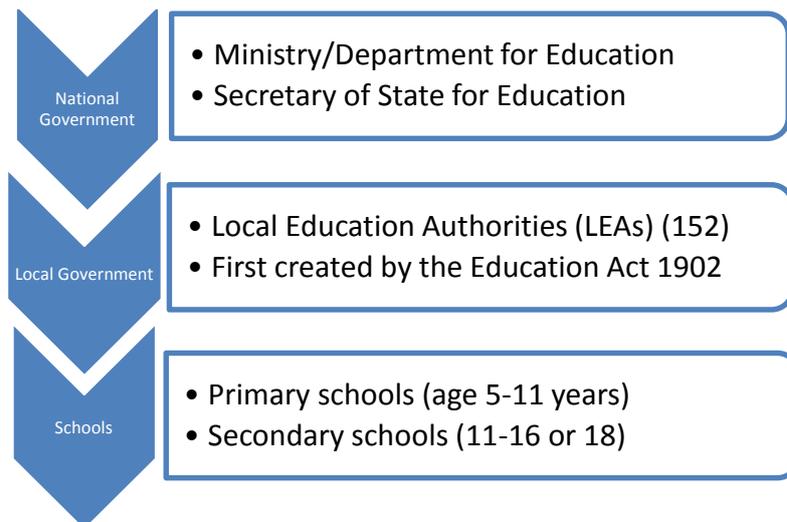
Following this there was a period when governments gave more and more independence and autonomy to schools. It was felt that this enabled schools to operate more efficiently and to achieve better results for their pupils. This was the period from about the mid-1980s to recent years.

As this phase progressed, it was recognised that completely autonomous schools were impractical and simply did not work: an element of collaboration, partnership and co-operation was needed too. This rebalancing has mainly been taking place from around 2005 to the present and has led to important debates about the best ways in which to support school improvement. In the light of the recent UK General Election result (in May 2015), returning a majority Conservative Government, it can be speculated that there will now be a push back towards school autonomy.

THE FIRST COLLABORATION PHASE

The first schools in England were set up as individual institutions, mainly by charities and religious groups. By 1902, however, it was widely recognised that coordination was required and local education authorities (LEAs) were created. From this point onwards, and for most of the twentieth century, there were three major players in English education (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Phase 1 collaboration - main partners



Although the Ministry (or Department) of Education, headed by an individual Secretary of State for Education, could give direction and shape schooling policy at a national level, the strongest relationship was between the LEA and schools. The LEAs played a fundamental part in planning, providing and implementing schooling in this period. They had a key responsibility for the education of children in their pre-defined administrative area. The LEA was in charge of funding and admissions, and supported schools in many other ways, e.g. maintaining buildings, professional development, specialist subject advisers, and special educational needs. They provided a bridge between primary and secondary schools and could support schools with various methods for sharing good practice.

TOWARDS SCHOOL AUTONOMY

LEAs still exist, and there are 152 of them in England, but gradually their role has declined. The decline in the LEA-school partnership did not happen overnight, but it probably began in earnest with the 1988 Education Reform Act and continued with a series of reforms that followed this Act.

So, how did the move towards school autonomy take place? School autonomy was achieved partly through direct and indirect changes to the LEA's role but also, and perhaps more importantly, through the creation of different types of schools and funding mechanisms. These included the following:

- City Technology Colleges (CTCs)
- Local Management of Schools (LMS)
- Grant Maintained Status (GMS)
- [Faith and Grammar Schools]
- Specialist Schools Programme
- Academies
- Free Schools

Each of these school types, or programmes, involved some form of increased independence for schools and a lessening of the role of the LEA. The most significant, arguably, are the last two school types on the list, which represent the most recent government initiatives (see Section 5). Driven by notions of parental choice and locally-run schools, school autonomy increased dramatically from the 1990s onwards.

RE-BALANCING: BRINGING BACK COLLABORATION

In the last few years, as noted above, the allocation of autonomy to schools has been increasing at a fairly rapid pace and the role of the LEA, although it has not disappeared, has weakened. But it has been recognised in some quarters that too much autonomy can be a bad thing and that some forms of school

collaboration are necessary. This was recognised, for example, in the following comment from the Chair of the House of Commons Education Committee (Graham Stuart MP, a member of the Conservative Party which generally favours school autonomy):

The Government wants schools to take more responsibility for themselves and each other in delivering a true self-improving school system. It wants schools to look not to local authorities for expertise but to each other... a self-improving system needs a degree of coordination and strong incentives to encourage schools to look beyond their own school gate. Otherwise there is a danger that many schools will operate in isolation rather than in cooperation.

It can be seen that Stuart favours a ‘self-improving’ system but also recognises that there is an important place for co-operation. Over recent years, cooperation between schools has taken many forms, ranging from light touch to very close partnerships. Examples of policies and initiatives that have aimed to encourage collaboration and partnership between English schools have included Beacon Schools, Federations of Schools, Excellence in Cities, London Challenge (see Woods, 2014), National Teaching Schools and Academy Chains.

Despite these initiatives, school autonomy has remained strong, and some critics continue to challenge the lack of collaboration and the moves towards competition between schools. The challenges were based predominantly on two major critiques or questions about the ‘autonomous’ school:

1. What happens to school accountability?
2. Does school autonomy improve pupil attainment?

The accountability question is particularly interesting and relevant to international school systems. In England schools have accountability to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the school inspection system, but inspections may only take place every few years. There used to be some accountability to LEAs in terms of school standards, but this has lessened as the role of the LEA has been downplayed.

The lessened role of the LEA may also mean that the individual who is the Secretary of State for Education can be seen as more powerful than previously. For example, this Minister can effectively decide the contents of a National Curriculum, or when and how children should be tested. He or she, in theory at least, is accountable to Parliament, but it has been argued that school autonomy, rather ironically, has made the Minister of State much more powerful in terms of education policy. This is partly because there is now no ‘middle area’, or ‘middle tier’. This ‘middle’ policy and accountability space used to be filled by LEAs, but now central government to may be filling the gap.

In a significant international report, published in 2011, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examined the relationships between school accountability and pupil attainment. Any policy maker in any country considering issues of school accountability would do well to study this report’s findings carefully before making decisions about school types and school structures. The report noted that ‘The degree and types of school autonomy vary widely among countries’. Bearing this in mind, the authors, making use of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data, analysed the relationships between school autonomy and pupil performance. The key finding was that: ‘Autonomy and accountability go together: greater autonomy in decisions relating to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with better student performance, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability’ (OECD, 2011, p.4).

In other words, giving schools autonomy in itself will not necessary lead to an improvement in student attainment, but, on the basis of the PISA data, giving schools autonomy *within an appropriate accountability framework* does appear to be positively related with improved student outcomes.

A NEW MOVE TOWARDS AUTONOMY?

Since the UK General Election of May 2015, which gave the Conservative Party a majority of Members of Parliament, policies towards school organisation in England have become clearer and it seems there is a further, renewed emphasis on school autonomy. The Conservative Party Manifesto states that the

Government will ‘turn every failing and coasting secondary school into an academy’ and, over the next Parliament, ‘will open at least 500 new free schools’ (Conservative Party Election Manifesto, pp.33, 34)

Although there are some challenges in defining ‘coasting’ schools the Government is pressing ahead with ‘academisation’. Any school that is launched as, or converted to, an ‘academy’ is taken fully out of LEA control and has responsibility for its own budget. At the time of writing (May 2015) more than half of English secondary schools and around a quarter of primary schools were academies, so this was becoming the predominant form of school structure. Free Schools are independent and can be set up by organisations and individuals and, once approved by the Department for Education, receive state funding and have no LEA control.

It seems that the promotion and creation of both of these types of schools will lead to a much higher degree of school autonomy than has previously been seen in England, and in some respects it remains to be seen how school accountability will be developed. Referring back to Figure 1, it seems that we have moved from collaboration, through greater school autonomy, back to new forms of collaboration, and now back to what might be called enhanced autonomy. In this sense, England is embarking on what could be seen as a major ‘experiment’ in school organisation. Husbands (2015) supports this view. He refers to ‘a largely autonomous system of competing schools’ and says that, soon, ‘England’s school system will look like few others in the world’.

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