

School Autonomy Reform and Social Justice in Australian Public Education

Progress Report 2, 2021



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Progress Report 2, 2021: Preliminary observations from Phase Two case studies

There is strong political consensus in Australia and internationally that greater school autonomy and localised decision making will drive up academic standards and improve public education. There is little empirical evidence for this consensus. Existing evidence indicates greater local decision-making autonomy has increased inequalities at system and school levels.

Our project *School Autonomy Reform and Social Justice in Australian Public Education* (an Australian Research Council Discovery Project) led and administered by Deakin University with Monash University, Curtin University, and the University of New South Wales, examines how school autonomy is understood by key education stakeholders in Australia, how it is enacted in Australian public schools, and the implications for social justice. This qualitative study is identifying the barriers and enablers to enacting social justice within this policy context.

Our three-year study is examining these issues across four Australian states (NSW, Qld, Vic., WA) and nationally, and involves three phases: 1) a critical review of school autonomy reform policy and interviews with key stakeholders; 2) case studies with a diverse range of schools; and 3) an articulation of the social justice dilemmas uncovered in our work, a position paper and dissemination of our findings to our stakeholders.

In the first phase, we conducted a policy review from the 1970s that explored how the social justice intentions of school autonomy reform have shifted across the last 50 years, and we interviewed 42 public education stakeholders across Australia, including representatives from educational bureaucracies, government, parent organisations, principal associations, principals, professional organisations, academia and teacher unions. We reported on our preliminary findings from this phase in Report 1, and our publications from this phase are listed on Page 4.

Phase Two of our research, delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, includes four case studies in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, with two more case studies scheduled in 2022. Our case studies include both primary and secondary schools located in rural, regional and metropolitan locations. In these case studies to date we have interviewed 58 participants including principals and principal class staff, teaching and support staff, business managers and parents about their understandings and experiences of autonomy, and how social justice is implicated. In this report we offer some preliminary observations based on our case studies to date.

We invite you to visit our website schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org and to follow us on twitter @SchoolSasj for further information about these findings and the project more broadly.

Preliminary Case Study Observations

1. Rural and regional schools

In autonomous systems with limited or no centralised support, rural and regional schools continue to face problems in attracting qualified staff to fill teaching and allied staff positions. Often these schools have a high turnover of staff with students being taught repeatedly by inexperienced graduate teachers.

2. Distance from the centre

In more autonomous and devolved systems, rural and remote schools experience greater physical distance from centralised bureaucracy/support. This means that schools are often operating independently without the same networks of support for principals and staff that are a common feature in metropolitan areas, reinforcing the critical role of the state in providing adequate support for rural and regional schools. One principal argued that rural and regional schools have been forced to embrace a 'fend for yourself' approach.

3. Teachers' work

Educators want autonomy in the classroom. However, principal autonomy does not necessarily translate into teacher autonomy and this varies across sites. In smaller schools in our sample, educators reported greater satisfaction in opportunities for collaboration and agency and autonomy, however small schools don't always allow for staff career progression. On the other hand, where staff turnover is high, such as in low SES, small and rural schools, inexperienced educators may find themselves fast tracked into middle leadership roles with minimal support or training.

In one of the case study schools, there was a clear disparity in levels of professional autonomy – while the leadership team experienced high levels of professional autonomy, the teachers felt disempowered. Where accountability measures included high levels of surveillance, this was experienced by educators as micro-management and distrust contributing to high staff turnover.

4. Competition between and residualisation of schools

The current education systems in Australia are marketised and encourage competition between schools (e.g., school success is measured based on performance on narrow external accountabilities, this success attracts more students and schools are funded on student numbers). In this marketized system, neighbouring schools are increasingly seeking ways to distinguish themselves from their competitors through specific programs like sports academies, etc., to attract and retain students. As one principal commented, 'I know we need to make our school unique, to survive'. This has meant deploying staff to work specifically on marketing, or grant writing in an effort 'to survive'. Such competition leads to residualisation within the system, where 'good' schools can attract more students and more resourcing, while other less fortunate schools are left to struggle – often with students who require more support.

5. Politicisation of school councils/boards

The increasing marketisation of education has led to a politicisation of school councils/boards. Increasingly the membership of school councils/boards is focused on selection of board members co-opted from businesses and the community, or the political class, rather than the election of parent representatives. This has implications for parent-school partnerships – advantaging already privileged public schools who tend to have access to parents with higher credentials than less privileged schools. It also has implications for democracy – with school councils potentially no longer representing the diverse range of demographics in their school.

6. Finances and accountability

The accountability requirements for reporting equity funding expenditure vary across states. The oversight of this expenditure also varies. This creates conditions whereby this funding could be used for purposes than otherwise intended (i.e., in non-legitimate ways). The recent Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission investigations into the corruption of some education staff in Victoria have exposed the risk of autonomy without adequate oversight: inadequate oversight and accountability (or inadequate support for principals in financial literacy) can lead to mismanagement of resources.

7. External consultants

Some schools use their equity and SRP funding to engage external educational and non-educational consultants to manage a variety of issues, such as leadership coaching. The reporting on this expenditure varies across state jurisdictions but can have worrying impacts for equity and social justice when the funds are not directed to this purpose and systems do not demand sufficient accountability for how it is spent.

Project Members

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For more information on our project, please contact Professor Amanda Keddie or Dr Katrina MacDonald.

Publications

- Niesche, R., Eacott, S., Keddie, A., Gobby, B., MacDonald, K., Wilkinson J., and Blackmore J., (2021). Principals' perceptions of school autonomy and educational leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211034174>
- MacDonald, K., Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Wilkinson, J., Gobby, B., Niesche, R. and Eacott, S., (2021). School autonomy reform and social justice: a policy overview of Australian public education (1970s to present). *Australian Educational Researcher*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00482-4>
- Eacott, S., MacDonald, K., Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Wilkinson, J., Niesche, R., Gobby, B., and Fernandez, I. (2020) COVID19 and inequities in Australian education – insights on federalism, autonomy, and access. *International Studies in Educational Administration*. 48(3):6-14.
- Keddie, A., MacDonald, K., Blackmore, J., Eacott, S., Gobby, B., Mahoney, C., Niesche, R., and Wilkinson, J., (2020) School autonomy, marketisation and social justice: The plight of principals and schools, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. 52(4):432-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1818699>
- Keddie, A., MacDonald, K., Blackmore, J., Wilkinson, J., Gobby, B., Niesche, R., Eacott, S., and Mahoney, C. (2020) The constitution of school autonomy in Australian public education: areas of paradox for social justice. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. 10.1080/13603124.2020.1781934

Under Review

- MacDonald, K. and Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Eacott, S., Wilkinson, J., Niesche, R., and Gobby, B. (under review) The stratigraphy of economic maldistribution in public-school funding in Australia: Still a poisonous debate. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*.
- Blackmore, J., MacDonald, K., Keddie, A., Gobby, B., Wilkinson, J., Eacott, S., and Niesche, R. (under review) Election and/or selection? School autonomy reform, governance and the politics of school boards/councils. *Journal of Education Policy*.
- Gobby, B., Wilkinson, J., Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Eacott, S., MacDonald, K., Niesche, R., (under Review). Gathering multiple school autonomies for more ethical realities. *Critical Studies in Education*.
- Eacott, S., Niesche, R., Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Wilkinson, J., Gobby, B., MacDonald, K., and Fernandez, I. (Under Review) Autonomy, instructional leadership and improving outcomes – The LSLD reforms in NSW, Australia. *School Leadership and Management*

Please contact Dr Katrina MacDonald for copies of these publications.