

## AUTONOMY, COLLABORATION AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

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The argument of this paper is that five conditions must be satisfied for effective change to occur:

1. teachers should retain a relatively high degree of autonomy over pedagogy;
2. teachers need to become more collaborative at the levels of pedagogy, planning and policy making - which may entail some loss of individual autonomy;
3. successful collaboration is dependent as much on school cultures as upon their structures;
4. the creation of collaborative cultures is a key task of school leadership;
5. successful school leadership is essentially *educational* leadership.

### TEACHER AUTONOMY

Practitioner autonomy is at the centre of what might be called the 'classical' concept of a profession. The argument runs thus: although a considerable degree of professional practice is routine professionals must also deal with conditions of uncertainty whereby they need to make judgements in the interests of clients on the basis of experience and of the knowledge acquired during initial training and subsequent professional development in the process of which professionals will have internalized a set of client-centred values which are guaranteed through a system of peer control.

This is, of course, an idealised picture - particularly of teaching as a profession - and there are many objections to it as a description of the actual situation and as a model [Hoyle, 1980]. These objections include the following:

1. The argument for autonomy is a concealed attempt to avoid accountability.
2. It is based on the notion of an independent practitioner and an individual client whereas many professionals work in organizations and the state is their client.
3. Even if the model was applicable to, say, medicine it is not applicable to teaching since teaching is not a 'full' profession in terms of the skills, knowledge and values of teachers nor in having institutions which guarantee effective practice.

There is much truth in these objections and although teaching is in the process of professionalization in many societies there are considerable, perhaps, insurmountable barriers to the achievement of the full professional status briefly outlined above. The trend may well be in the other direction in some systems. This is certainly true in contemporary Britain where the pattern of accountability has changed over the past ten to fifteen years. Darling-Hammond [1989] distinguished between a number of forms of accountability of which the following are three:

**Bureaucratic accountability** - agencies of government promulgate rules and regulations intended to assure citizens that public functions will be carried out in pursuit of public goals voiced through democratic or legal processes

**Professional accountability** - governments may create professional bodies and structures to ensure competence and appropriate practice in occupational membership, standards, and practices to these bodies

**Market accountability** - governments may choose to allow clients or consumers to choose what services best meet their needs; to preserve the utility of this form of acceptability, monopolies are prevented, freedom of choice is protected, and truthful information is required of service providers.

Britain has never formally adopted a pattern of professional accountability but, for reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, individual schools and teachers have enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy in terms of curriculum and pedagogy which reached its apotheosis in the late 1960s. Subsequent policies have made use of both of the other forms of accountability: bureaucratic accountability being pursued through detailed prescriptions issued by central government and market accountability being pursued by devolving budgets and making the school the unit of account in the expectation that the competition thereby engendered will make teachers more susceptible to control by school governors and parents generally. Education in a number of English-speaking countries is following similar patterns.

Thus the change efforts of the present British government are geared towards enhancing uniformity in curriculum and pedagogy and thereby reducing the autonomy of the teacher - though also enhancing within certain constraints the autonomy of the school, a point which will be addressed later. Whether there was a case for reducing teacher autonomy could be debated at length but the point to be made here is that whatever changes in curriculum and pedagogy are intended there are inherent limits in the degree to which teachers' classroom autonomy could, or should, be reduced.

The endemic uncertainties in education stem from the loosely-coupled nature of the link between goals, structures, technology and outcomes, a topic of much theorising and some research over the past decade or more. The basis of this uncertainty lies in the nature of educational goals which are both diffuse and diverse. They are diffuse because they are holistic, long-term and concerned with bringing about fundamental changes in individuals. They are diverse because they range from the

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inculcation of the deepest moral values to, say, instruction in road safety drills. They are, as usually set out, unattainable. The grand goals attributed to education have, of course, to be scaled down and operationalized within a much more limited curriculum. This is a means of reducing uncertainty and limiting the role of the teacher in interpreting goals. However, although a government may issue detailed curriculum prescriptions and specify the attainment targets to be met, it may only be seizing upon what is specifiable and measurable without removing from teachers the task of achieving the broader goals of education. In contemporary Britain the government has attempted to specify the content of the academic curriculum but has charged schools with a range of broader, more fundamental, and less easily measurable, goals of a cross curricular variety.

**UNCERTAINTY IS ENDEMIC IN THE CLASSROOM.**

The complexity and unpredictability of the classroom is well documented in ethnographic studies and the need to cope with this in imaginative ways remains a characteristic of life in classrooms. Moreover, teaching is characterized by *equifinality*, the possibility of achieving the same ends through a variety of means. Whilst it would be foolish to argue that all teaching methods might be equally successful, one must concede that the same result can be achieved by a variety of methods. What is more, those methods in which teachers believe and to which they are strongly committed are likely to be most effective and this commitment is ultimately an individual accomplishment.

The diffuseness and diversity of goals and the equifinality of teaching methods, together with the difficulty of specifying objectives without also setting aside many of the goals which education is expected to achieve, endows schools as organizations with a high degree of uncertainty. This is well illustrated in the work of March and associates [March and Olsen, 1976] and others working in the same tradition which has demonstrated the profound ambiguity inherent in educational organizations.

To the endemic uncertainties of education must be added contingent uncertainties. This is not the context in which to rehearse these in detail. In most developed and developing countries education has increasingly become a more salient institution and hence has become caught up in the accelerating rate of social, economic, political and technological change. Governments have charged education with many functions including economic progress, nation-building and social control. Grandiose goals have been set for education and parental expectations have substantially increased, particularly as the link between education, or the credentials which it provides, and occupation is perceived as becoming tighter. But, more generally, education is becoming seen as an important area of consumption for many families.

The result of these trends is that the role of the teacher is, in some systems, approaching the point of overload. The uncertainty stems from the fact that not all

governmental and parental expectations can be met, or met to the same degree, and in some instances are incompatible. Despite the best efforts of governments to reduce uncertainty through legislation, individual schools and teachers confront the necessity of making choices. It is this necessity of choice which puts a premium on professional judgement at the school and classroom level. However, the fact that professional decisions have to be made at both levels renders school management problematic, particularly on the issue of autonomy which leads to a challenge to the traditional idea of a profession and associated notions of professionalism.

These conditions are such that any change effort which does not recognize the inevitability of, respect for, a degree of teacher autonomy will ultimately founder. Governments have the legitimacy to determine a national curriculum. However, if they seek to specify a particular mode of pedagogy - a single method of teaching reading, for example - and thereby reduce by fiat the classroom autonomy of the teacher, this is likely to inhibit effective teaching. The motivation of teachers is paramount and turns on a freedom to make pedagogical decisions on the basis of their knowledge and experience and in the light of the situation in which they are working together with a voice in shaping their immediate work context.

There are very positive aspects of teacher autonomy but there is also a negative side. This is centred upon teacher isolation. Teachers need guidance as well as freedom, and support as well as non-intervention. Autonomy needs to be embedded within a collaborative school culture [Lortie, 1975; Anderson, 1987;].

## COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONALITY

There is little doubt that the quality of education is enhanced when teachers work more closely together. A growing body of literature on school improvement and effectiveness almost universally reports the beneficial effects of this collaboration, e.g. Fullan [1992a; 1992b], Hargreaves and Hopkins [1991], Nias, Southworth and Yeomans [1989]. This is undoubtedly the most promising future direction for teacher professionalism. However, we have in play a variety of terms to describe the relevant process(es): *collegial*, *collaborative*, *participative*, *integrative*, which may each be linked to such terms as *culture* and *climate* and *professionalism* and *professionalism*. The terms may, or may not be, referring to the same phenomenon. They can be defined differently and operationalised differently. This matters not at the level of semantics and the writers cited above are all very experienced researchers who make clear in each case the empirical referent of their terms. But, in the wider debate, there may well be confusion abroad and there is a danger of unwarranted enthusiasm - mostly - but also unwarranted pessimism.

One needs to be clear about the *areas* of involvement, perhaps drawing a crude distinction between *policy*, *planning* and *pedagogy* since it would appear that, whilst teachers are becoming increasingly collaborative at the levels of policy and planning, this is less obvious and, perhaps, less achievable at the level of pedagogy.. One needs

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also to know the degree to which collaboration is *voluntary*, *enforced*, [Smyth, 1991], or *contrived*, defined by Hargreaves, A. [1992] as follows:

"Contrived collegiality reconstitutes teacher relations in the administrators' own image - regulating and reconstructing teachers' lives so that they support the predictable implementation of administrative plans and purposes, rather than creating the unpredictable development of teachers' own. Contrived collegiality also regulates the pace of change, so as to 'force' human growth among teachers, like so much rhubarb; speeding it up and synchronizing it with administratively convenient timeliness and expectations. The contrast between collaborative cultures and contrived collegiality as ways of constituting teachers' interpersonal relations and the relationship of each of these things to administrative intent..."

And one needs to know the degree to which collaboration emerges from the *culture* or *climate* of a school or is incorporated in its *structure*. Many other distinctions could be made. The task of clarifying the terminology and, more importantly, mapping the practices to which they relate is beyond the scope of this paper (and the competence of its author) and one must therefore be content with making a number of points.

In a paper which is highly relevant to the present discussion, Little [1990] suggests that collaboration can be ranged on a continuum from *independence* to *interdependence* which has ranged along it a set of discrete activities which include *story-telling* and *scanning*, *aid* and *assistance*, *sharing* and *joint work* (i.e. "the shared responsibility for the work of teaching"). She is not wholly sanguine about some of the claims made for collaboration. She writes:

"When I attend closely to the accounts of teachers' professional relationships that have accumulated over the past decade, however, I am confronted by certain inescapable conclusions. A few schools stand out for the achievements wrought collectively by their faculties but much 'that passes for collegiality does not add up to much'. Teachers' collaborations sometimes serve the purposes of well-conceived change, but the assumed link between increased collegial contact and improvement-oriented change does not seem to be warranted: closely bound groups are instruments both for promoting change and for conserving the present. Changes, indeed, may prove substantial or trivial. Finally, collaborations may arise naturally out of the problems and circumstances that teachers experience in common, but often they appear contrived, inauthentic, grafted on, perched precariously (and often temporarily) on the margins of real work."

The rhetoric of collegiality sometimes ignores the distribution of power in the school [Hoyle, 1986]. There is a *strong* and a *weak* connotation of collegiality. A strong connotation was offered by Lortie [1964] when he described collegiality as "a

situation in which professional equals govern their affairs through democratic procedures". A weak connotation would equate with a looser form of voluntary collaboration. The 'strong' connotation implies that authority rests with the collegial group. This is not the case in Britain. Heads have authority, teachers have influence. It is one of the key tasks of headship to establish structures whereby teachers make their professional input to policy-making. One must therefore place collegiality within the substantial literature on patterns of participation which has been most recently reviewed by Bacharach et al [1990]. Teachers vary in their desire for participation in general and in the specific areas of decision-making in which they wish to participate. Satisfaction is a function of the relationship between a wish to participate and the opportunity to do so.

The literature suggests that the most effective professional collaboration occurs where the culture of climate of the school supports it. Collaborator professionalism is used here to describe a pattern of professional collaboration amongst teachers which is emergent, voluntaristic, and related to specific pedagogical problems. It is a cultural rather than a structural dimension of schools, although its patterns may become institutionalized. Hargreaves, A. and Dawe, R. [1990] define collaborative cultures as comprising "evolutionary relationships of openness, trust and support among teachers where they define and develop their own purposes as a community". Nias, Southworth and Yeomans [1989] describe a collaborative culture as follows:

"To sum up, the 'culture of collaboration' arises from and embodies a set of what may broadly be described as moral beliefs about the value of the relationship between individuals and groups. It does not grow from shared beliefs about the nature or organization of curriculum content or teaching methods, but it has an impact in several ways upon educational practice in a school. It leads over time to the formation of a broad curricular and pedagogical consensus, tolerant of difference and divergence. It is an instrument of social and moral education, through the hidden curriculum and especially through the attitude and behaviour of staff towards one another. It encourages a sense of team pride and so of hard work, and it facilitates relaxed, spontaneous co-operation over teaching and other professional responsibilities."

The collaborative culture is located in interpersonal relationships rather than educational beliefs. The writers recognize that teachers bring into schools beliefs from their own subcultures of 'infant' or 'junior' - and in secondary schools, of course, there are strong subject subcultures. Teachers also differ in their views of pedagogy. However, although the culture of collaboration was primarily concerned with personal relationships rather than pedagogy, these writers suggest it had an indirect effect upon educational practice. There were some broad areas of agreement and the heads had

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established a mission for their schools. Individuality was respected, although those with extreme educational views were marginalised.

Teacher collaboration was one of the emerging innovations of the 1960s and the present writer included this as one of the characteristics of what he termed *extended professionalism* [Hoyle, 1972] but, like many other innovations of that period, it never became fully institutionalised. It remains an interesting question as to whether this was because it formed no part of a clear centralised strategy. Hargreaves, D. [1992] has recently written of collaboration as follows:

"Collaboration cannot be legislated into existence to replace individualism any more than virtue can be legislated to supersede vice. But we must not jump to a romantic, and very unsociological, position which assumes that collegiality springs up 'naturally' and 'spontaneously' when teachers are free from political and administrative intrusions. Collaboration is a culture that grows from structural roots, and these are indeed, as I have argued, affected by legislation and imposed reform."

The collaborative culture described by Nias and her colleagues was grounded in a pattern of interaction rather than a shared body of professional knowledge - though this element was not wholly absent. A further stage in the development of teaching as a profession would be the construction of a collective body of shared professional knowledge. The absence of such a body of knowledge is sometimes held to be one of the factors depressing the status of teaching as a profession. One can fully understand the puzzlement of parents and the irritation of politicians by the situation in which experience of generations of teachers and many decades of educational research there doesn't appear to be an unequivocal body of educational knowledge.

There are different kinds of theory which can be brought to bear on the institution of education. They include: educational theory which relates to purpose, structure and process of the educational enterprise, curriculum theory which relates to the selection and structuring of the content which is to be transmitted and pedagogical theory which relates to the process of transmission. These three categories can, of course, be increased and subdivided. Needless to say, these categories generate the political question of who determines the theory which is to 'count' at any particular time. There is then the question of the relationship between theory and valid knowledge. Politicians are naturally impatient with, say, theories about the teaching of reading and want the teaching profession to tell them the best method of teaching reading - or they will tell the teaching profession. But, in like manner, politicians want a cure for cancer, a solution to our economic problems and a method of halting the rise of criminality, none of which is readily forthcoming.

If one concedes that teaching is unlikely to generate a shared body of theory at the educational or curricular levels, is it likely that it might at least generate a shared

body of theory of the pedagogical knowledge, an agreed 'technical culture'? [Lortie [1975]. There would be very wide agreement about a range of basic classroom skills which teachers need based on common-sense, cumulative experience and research. The problem arises when one moves from skills to methods for at this point a wider body of often conflicting knowledge comes into play, plus the effects of experience and values and beliefs about how children do or should learn. To this must be added the endemic and contingent uncertainties of the classroom.

These difficulties ought not to lead us to advocate a complete reversion to classroom autonomy and the abandonment of generating a collaborative culture which will enhance the professionalism of teaching. The focus of further development should perhaps be on the norms of a professional culture rather than the content.

It is unlikely that teaching will ever reach the stage of having a culture based on an agreed body of knowledge. This is not to say that a substantial body of educational research has not been built up over the years, but no-one supposes that one can 'read off' direct implications for practice. Teachers construct the knowledge base which underpins practice from a variety of sources: experience, colleagues and the literature. Professionalism will be enhanced to the degree that learning from colleagues and the literature is increased. It would seem that the best way forward lies in strengthening the international element in the professional culture as described by Nias, Southworth and Yeomans [op cit] and others. However, this culture will be strengthened to the degree that the discourse entailed by constructions which transcend experience. This is where Schon's well-known concept of the reflective practitioner [Schon, 1987] becomes relevant. It is the reflection on practice which might constitute an increasingly important component of professional discourse and it is perhaps the defence of one's professional practice which constitutes the essence of appraisal.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSIONALITY OF HEADTEACHERS**

Sustaining collaborative professionalism amongst teachers requires an appropriate professionalism on the part of the headteacher. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to explore the leadership styles and strategies most likely to be effective in achieving a collaborative structure. Studies which have indicated what these might be include those of Fullan [1992], Leithwood [1992], Nias, Southworth and Yeomans [op cit]. The prevailing literature on leadership is emphasizing the symbolic dimension with leaders as the creators of cultures, the makers of meaning, and the articulators of mission. Of the many discussions on which heads have to establish a contingent balance between competing demands which are relevant to this discussion is the capacity to create a mission which will give direction to the school whilst protecting the necessary autonomy for teachers and a respect for the individual beliefs about education, curriculum and pedagogy.

It is important that headteachers are quite firmly located within the teaching profession. Their beliefs and values centre around the educational needs of pupils and

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their strategies for school improvement are geared to this purpose. Emerging patterns of management development for headteachers have, by and large, been predicated upon the assumption that the professionalism of heads is ultimately an education professionalism. The evidence is that effective heads can handle the nuts and bolts of management, can create a collaborative climate and can articulate a mission which has sufficient educational content to give the school a broad steer at the level of ideas but to tolerate and support different perspectives. One expects that management development will continue to encourage and enhance this educationist position, but there are some dangers.

The movement towards competency-based training is rightly geared to enhancing those skills. The danger is that a limited focus on the generic skills of management might generate a different conceptualisation of the head as a professional. Teaching is one profession not two and it includes headteachers. Heads must certainly acquire management skills and the values which underpin these, but they also need to remain committed to an even more fundamental set of educational values. However, there may be quite strong pressures on heads to adopt a managerialistic position and there may well be some heads who see a managerialist professionalism as a way to achieve increased power, status and remuneration. There is a strong case for the professional development of headteachers, not only to provide skills training but to offset managerialist tendencies by ensuring that due attention is given to ideas and values.

Hodgkinson [1983] has distinguished between three levels of leadership skills which are, in descending order, a concern with *ideas, people* and *things*. Of course, successful heads must be able to manage in the narrower sense of being able to carry out the nuts and bolts functions, or at least to oversee the process. They must also be effective at the level of human resource management achieving as far as possible that other balancing act - between task and person - which was such a key element in earlier approaches to leadership theory. But above this they should be at ease within the realm of ideas about organizations and their management and about education.

In our present state of knowledge about management development in education one cannot be prescriptive about what is needed. Amongst the approaches suggested for extending the perspective of heads and potential heads are an exposure to the newer forms of organization theory, critical theory, and organizational ethics. None of these is going to provide specific answers to the problem of managing educational organizations but what is important is that they induce an appropriately professional openness to ideas to affect the narrower versions of managerialism.

It should not be thought that the the culture of collaborative professionalism is homogeneous or that teachers are in total professional agreement. The economy of the school cannot meet all the aspirations of teachers - for rooms, materials, staff, time, and salaries, neither can the culture of the school meet all teachers' professional aspirations which are, in any case, often related to resources. Teachers will have different interests which will remain in conflict and constitute the stuff of micropolitics. Nor will teachers

willingly yield their autonomy unless they feel that they have the cultural support for doing so. This presents headteachers with the complex task of achieving unity within diversity, the success of which will depend upon their professionalism. In any case, as argued above, there are limits to the degree that teachers' autonomy can be reduced whilst their effectiveness is maintained.

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