

**REALIGNING THE GOVERNANCE OF SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA:
ENERGISING AN EXPERIMENTALIST APPROACH**



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REALIGNING THE GOVERNANCE OF SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA: ENERGISING AN EXPERIMENTALIST APPROACH

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A realignment of structures and processes for the governance of public schools in Australia is likely to enhance outcomes and address several seemingly intractable problems in current arrangements. This paper proposes a shift from federal to state governments, from state governments to schools and, within schools, enhancing the professional autonomy of teachers.

The federal government's role in school education in Australia has increased steadily over the last half-century, especially since the landmark Karmel Report of 1973. However, its involvement is problematic given the trend to make the school a more significant entity in the governance of education. Aside from the fact that powers in relation to education lie with the states, there is no good reason why two levels of government should be involved. The paper draws on international research and offers comparisons with Canada where the federal government has no role in school education.

Current initiatives to increase the autonomy of public schools are explored, with a commentary on their consistency with an experimentalist approach. The work of Charles Sabel serves as a touchstone in this commentary. Mechanisms to ensure a continuing federal role in funding are briefly canvassed. Success calls for a response at the state and school level. Reference to states throughout the paper is understood to include the territories.

A diminished role for the federal government

A diminished role for the federal government in school education in no way detracts from the contributions it has made over the years. The need for a larger role became apparent nearly 50 years ago, with schools across the country being poorly resourced, and with significant disparities across and within sectors. As we shall see, the vertical fiscal imbalance between the two levels of government meant that there was little alternative to intervention at the federal level. However, circumstances change and evidence of impact over the years suggests the need to re-visit the role of the federal government and to develop a new mechanism for the distribution of funds.

Australia's performance on international tests of student achievement has declined and on national tests it has flat-lined. Relations between federal and state governments are often toxic, especially when there are changes of government. Significantly, however, there is now agreement that whether or not there is to be improvement in outcomes depends on capacities at the school level. Even though the report of the Interim Committee of the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1973) (Karmel Report) called for the 'devolution' of authorities and responsibilities to schools, it is only now that there is bipartisan agreement that a relatively high level of autonomy in important matters needs to reside at the school level. Apart from the money, the case for federal involvement is much weaker, especially as it can be shown that the states can fulfil their roles and, for government schools, administer a system that can raise levels of achievement. A history of related developments in the

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governance and funding of government and non-government schools from colonial times is contained in Wilkinson, Caldwell, Selleck, Harris and Dettman (2006).

An experimentalist perspective

This workshop is exploring the 'experimentalist alternative', a choice that is consistent with the higher levels of autonomy that are now expected for public schools in Australia. The expectation to achieve 'success for all students in all settings' demands a capacity at the school level to design and deliver an approach that to a large extent personalises the learning experience and where teachers and others are engaged in an ongoing and cyclical process of professional learning. Such processes harmonise with the 'experimentalist alternative' described by Charles Sabel and his colleagues (Sabel et al., 2010) in their report on 'special education' in Finland and other countries. Peer review in the context of institutional learning is a feature:

This peer review also creates a mechanism for institutional learning. It allows local error to be identified and corrected, dead ends in policy development to be detected and promising successes to be generalized or subjected to more intense scrutiny to verify initial results. Put another way, peer review as part of dynamic accountability affords the case worker and his team an opportunity to improve their decision making, while allowing the institution as a whole to reconsider current rules and routines in light of their successes and failures. Think of this as learning by monitoring. Because such organizations share with philosophical pragmatism the assumption that routines and even guiding assumptions will be in need of correction, and put that philosophy into practice by developing routines for regularly exploring the advisability of doing so, they are called pragmatist or experimentalist.

Special education in Finnish schools . . . has many elements of this form of experimentalist institution. (Sabel et al., 2010: 17)

Reference is made later in this paper to the Finland experience and to the significance of Sabel's work to developments and expectations for school autonomy in Australia (drawing also on Sabel, 2004).

Constitutional and fiscal arrangements in Australia and Canada

Australia, Canada and the United States have federal governments but only two have a powerful role in education, namely, Australia and the United States. While their respective constitutions leave policy to the states, federal governments exert influence through their power to make grants to the states to which conditions are attached. They have a federal minister (Australia) and federal secretary (United States) Their roles have expanded and become more complex as the decades have passed, with approaches that may be described as 'command-and-control', because states must adhere to an array of terms and conditions in order to receive funds. Federal bureaucracies are large in each instance.

In contrast, the federal government in Canada has no minister and no department, with cooperation and coordination across the ten provinces and two territories achieved through a council of ministers. Canada is a high performer in PISA, coming second to Finland among nations in the West. It has a highly diverse population; indeed cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are as multi-cultural as counterparts in Australia. Regional demographic disparities are similar in both countries. On all accounts, arrangements in Canada should be of special interest to those concerned with the governance of school education in Australia.

Under Canada's constitution (originally the British North America Act passed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom and the Parliament of Canada in 1867, now 'patriated' within the Constitution Act of 1982) the federal government has no role in education apart from the delivery of schooling for First Nation (indigenous) children, children of those who serve in the armed services, and those incarcerated in federal institutions. There is no federal minister for education and no federal department of education. With these exceptions

there is no federal funding for schools. Cooperation and coordination among the ten provinces and three territories is achieved through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).

It is helpful to look more closely at differences between Australia and Canada in respect to constitutional and fiscal arrangements. Under Canada's constitution, described in general terms above, specific powers were explicitly assigned to the federal government and to the provinces. Education was assigned to the provinces. Under Australia's constitution, specific powers were explicitly assigned to the federal government, and powers in other matters in which the states were already engaged were maintained, but without a specific listing in the constitution. Expressed another way, education, which had hitherto been the responsibility of the states, was not assigned to the federal government; it continued as a state responsibility. The authors of the Australian constitution were mindful of the Canadian arrangements and decided instead to follow what in general terms is set out in the constitution of the United States. The outcome as far as Canada is concerned is that its federal government may not make laws in the field of education except in matters that are explicitly assigned to it, as enumerated above.

For Australia, the federal government has increased its involvement in education, as in other fields, because of Section 96 of the constitution, which permits it to grant money to any state under whatever terms and conditions are mutually agreed. The nature and extent of this involvement has increased steadily since the late 1960s, as illustrated most recently in the various national partnership agreements for schools. States are not obliged to accept these grants, as was initially the case when Queensland and Western Australia, together with the Northern Territory, declined to sign on to 'Gonski funding' for which there were particular terms and conditions that were not acceptable. These jurisdictions have now signed up but without these constraints.

There are important differences in fiscal arrangements. There is a higher level of vertical fiscal imbalance in Australia than in Canada, reflecting the different capacities of the two levels of government to generate revenue. In Australia, this largely arose from the decision of the High Court on two occasions to uphold the exclusive right of the federal government to levy an income tax under legislation passed in 1942. In Canada, the provinces as well as the federal government may levy an income tax; indeed, income tax is the largest source of revenue for both levels of government. The federal government levies a Goods and Services Tax (5 percent), which is retained at that level, but provinces may levy a Provincial Sales Tax (at a higher rate than the GST) (Alberta has no PST). For some provinces these two taxes are brought together in a 'harmonised sales tax' which is distributed by formula. In Canada, the constitution provides the provinces with exclusive authority over natural resources, meaning that the latter retain royalties and the proceeds of any taxes they levy on their exploitation. Most provinces have now established sovereign wealth funds (SWF) into which these revenues are paid.

There is horizontal fiscal inequity in both countries, reflecting different capacities at the state and provincial levels to generate revenue. This is handled in Australia through horizontal fiscal equalisation (HFE) transfers by the Commonwealth Grants Commission.

The net effect of the foregoing is that the states in Australia are significantly dependent on the federal government for funds to support schools. Provinces in Canada do not, and cannot, secure financial support for their schools from the federal government.

The power of the states

Experience in two states – Victoria and New South Wales – demonstrates that, apart from a financial contribution, states are well able to administer their affairs in school education, independent of the federal government. There are noteworthy developments in other states.

Case study in innovation: Victoria

An Australian study that presented a case that a federal system with powers divided between two levels of government inhibits innovation in education was conducted by Bronwyn Hinz and reported in a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association in 2010 (Hinz, 2010).

Hinz investigated the design and implementation of the Schools of the Future initiative in Victoria in the 1990s in which a high level of autonomy was delivered to schools. In financial terms more than 90 percent of the state's recurrent (annual) budget for public schools was decentralised to schools for local decision-making. Hinz triangulated her sources of data, one of which was an extended interview with several of the key policy actors. She concluded that Victoria was able to design and implement Schools of the Future without reference to the federal government (the respective governments were of different political persuasion at the time). None of the actors could recall a single piece of correspondence or a single phone call on the matter between the two levels of government. There was no difficulty meeting the terms and conditions of grants from federal to state level since none were connected to the distribution of authority and responsibility within the system.

She referred to views of supporters and detractors alike that this was 'the most radical Australian education reform in the last century' (Hinz, 2010: 1). She suggested that an innovation on this scale may not have been possible if agreement between the two levels of government or broad agreement among the states on the particular matter of school autonomy was required. She suggested that the successful initiative 'undermines the belief, prominent especially among education academics, media commentators and federal politicians, that a greater federal role and policy uniformity is necessary to improve outcomes and accountability in school education' and went on to note that 'Canada has one of the world's top-performing education systems and possesses close convergence among provincial school system organization and per-pupil expenditure, despite the absence of national government programs, directives, or tied grants for schooling' (Hinz, 2010: 14).

In summary, the highly innovative if not radical Schools of the Future project in Victoria proceeded because the state government of the day was in a position to implement it without federal involvement or approval.

Case study in policy coherence: New South Wales

New South Wales provides a case study of a state's capacity to design and deliver comprehensive and coherent policies to transform education independent of the federal government, albeit with a significant injection of funds from the latter under national partnership agreements. This capacity was demonstrated in a presentation of the Minister for Education at the Education World Forum in London on 21 January 2014, addressing a paper entitled Transforming Education: The New South Wales Reform Journey (Piccoli, 2014).

It is not intended at this point to offer a critique of these policies; the intention is to highlight their coherence and the capacity of the state to formulate them. These are addressed in the paper under the following titles: (1) reforms across the teacher career cycle, (2) a funding model that puts students first, (3) education architecture of the future, (4) public school governance, (5) targeted reform – closing student performance gaps in rural and remote schools, and (6) micro-targeted reform – throwing out the rule book in complex communities. In respect to #4, significant empowerment at the local level is contrasted with the traditionally highly centralised approach to governance:

- The lessons from high-performing systems around the world guided our policy development. Key features of these systems point clearly to factors that lead to better student outcomes, including increasing school principals' authority over decision-making and fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation within and between schools. (Piccoli, 2014: 5)

- In doing so, we are breaking down the highly centralised public schooling system and redirecting staff and resources from head office directly back to schools (Piccoli, 2014: 6).
- We have established 65 networks of principals to encourage collaboration across schools and innovative approaches to student engagement and learning needs (Piccoli, 2014: 6).

Whether these policies energise capacities at the school level in a manner consistent with an experimentalist culture is a matter for ongoing research.

It is striking that the federal government is mentioned only twice, and briefly, in the minister's account: once in relation to the funding of non-government schools (p. 2) and again to indicate that the state was the first to sign up with the federal government to implement the Gonski reforms that called for needs-based funding (p. 4).

Other cases

Two other cases are of interest. Western Australia has implemented its Independent Public Schools program that delivers a higher level of autonomy for government schools along the lines of the Victorian initiative. About one-third of schools are part of the program. As in Victoria, there was no federal involvement, and the state declined to participate in the federally-funded Empowering Local Schools project – the only jurisdiction in the public and private sectors to do so. Along with the Northern Territory and Queensland, Western Australia did not initially sign up to Gonski but a new agreement following the election in September 2013 has resulted in the same level of funding but without the constraining terms and conditions.

Queensland is now receiving Gonski money but is distributing funds according to state priorities, with a focus on the early years. As reported by Ferrari (2014): 'In allocating the extra funding, the state government has rejected the Gonski approach to allocating funding to schools based on the needs of individual students, instead directing it to literacy and numeracy skills, particularly in the early years of school'.

A counter-argument

A counter-argument to the view that federal governments may get in the way of the efforts of state-based initiatives was mounted by Chad Lykins and Stephen Heyneman at Vanderbilt University in research commissioned by the Centre on Education Policy in Washington DC for its project on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education (Lykins and Heyneman, 2008). They compared the roles of federal governments in Australia, Canada and Germany with the role of the federal government in the United States [Germany is like Canada and has no national department or ministry; they observed that 'Canadian provinces more closely resemble independent countries rather than dependent provinces (Lykins and Heyneman, 2008: 7)]. They argued for a strong role for federal governments, in particular for the United States: 'the federal government, in addition to fostering a culture of accountability, must help create an environment that enables success' and that 'success depends on a second wave of reform that will increase the federal government's role not just in setting standards, but in helping states achieve them' (Lykins and Heyneman, 2008: 15-16).

On the other hand, they contend, there is no one best way to structure the governance of education in a federal system, or any system with several layers of government, each of which seeks a role in education: 'Policies that are best implemented at the national level in one country may be better implemented at the state or local level in another' (Lykins and Heyneman, 2008: 2). The central issue is whether the field is so crowded, with every leader wanting to be 'the education [president, prime minister, premier]', that schools are unnecessarily constrained from doing the very best for their students.

Recent international findings on school autonomy

The findings from the most recent tests in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) support a higher level of autonomy for schools in functions that are most relevant to learning. These tests involved a sample of 15-year-olds from 65 countries. The focus was on mathematics. The findings in respect to autonomy in curriculum and assessment could not be clearer: 'Schools with more autonomy over curricula and assessments tend to perform better than schools with less autonomy when they are part of school systems with more accountability arrangements and / or greater teacher-principal collaboration in school management' (OECD, 2013: 24). Another finding was that 'between 2003 and 2012 there was a clear trend towards schools using student assessments to compare the school's performance with district or national performance and with that of other schools' (OECD, 2013: 24). Research along these lines was cited in support of the *StudentsFirst* initiative on school autonomy ('independent public schools') announced by federal Minister for Education Christopher Pyne on 3 February 2014. Earlier and similar findings in PISA were cited in support of the Gillard Government's project on Empowering Local Schools.

There is a powerful educational logic to locating a higher level of authority, responsibility and accountability for curriculum, teaching and assessment at the school level. Each school has a unique mix of students in respect to their needs, interests, aptitudes and ambitions; indeed, each classroom has a unique mix. A capacity to adapt a curriculum that meets international standards to this unique mix is essential. The same applies to approaches to teaching (pedagogy). Doing this well assumes a capacity for assessment *for* learning as well as assessment *of* learning, and not just testing, and reporting the outcomes.

If all schools did these things well Australia might move closer to jurisdictions like high-performing Finland, some provinces in Canada, and other jurisdictions, where the gap between low-and high-achieving students is relatively narrow, as highlighted in the results of PISA 2012: 'In Finland, early detection mechanisms, such as periodic individualised assessments of students by several groups of teachers, allow educators to identify struggling students and offer them the necessary support early on, before they become stuck and cannot continue their education at the same pace as their peers' (OECD, 2013: 14).

Charles Sabel and his colleagues investigated developments in Finland along these lines (Sabel et al., 2010) and described the capacity for school self-evaluation in terms of an experimentalist approach – the theme of this workshop.

Finnish teachers, and particularly special education teachers, are taught from the first that instruction must be connected to research into learning, and vice versa. The continuous development and refinement of assessment instruments is one expression of this connection. They are committed to the view that special needs teaching can be reconciled with—can indeed be integral to—normal classroom teaching: the prevalence of part-time special needs education is a conspicuous and, we have seen, effective expression of that commitment. They take collaboration—for example between subject or classroom teachers and special-education teachers—for granted, and engage in peer review in the SWG [Student Welfare Group] and other settings as a matter of course. (Sabel, et al. 2010: 53)

The self-transforming school

A framework for describing the shift in authority, responsibility and accountability to schools was proposed in *The Self-Transforming School* (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013) that draws on research, policy and practice in a number of countries over the last twenty-five years, including Australia, Canada, Finland and the United States, and describes themes that are likely to characterise further change over the next twenty-five.

A *self-managing school* is one to which there has been decentralised a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make decisions on the allocation of resources within a

centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). Resources are defined broadly to include staff, services and infrastructure, each of which will typically entail the allocation of funds to reflect local priorities. A self-managing school has a high level of, but not complete autonomy, given the centrally-determined framework.

Whereas a capacity for self-management is chiefly concerned with process, self-transformation is intended to shift the focus to outcomes. A *self-transforming school* achieves or is well on its way to achieving significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all of its students regardless of the setting.

The self-transforming school includes but goes beyond the concept of the *self-improving school*. David Hargreaves has written a series of 'think pieces' for the National College for School Leadership in England organised around the idea of a 'self-improving school system' (SISS). He described how school improvement has 'come to be defined in terms of the processes of intervention in schools that are deemed, by whatever measure, to be underperforming' (Hargreaves, 2010: 4). He argued that a SISS, once established:

reduces the need for extensive, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context, with out-of-school courses not tailored to individual professional needs, and external, last-ditch interventions to remedy schools in difficulties, all of which are very costly and often only partially successful. (Hargreaves, 2010: 23)

Hargreaves considers a capacity for self-management to be a pre-requisite for self-improvement. However, limiting the approach to improvement does not address the need for transformation when one considers what is occurring in many nations. Improvement occurs within current approaches to schooling; transformation seeks success for all in what are certain to be dramatically different approaches to schooling in the years ahead.

In the statement cited above, Hargreaves captured some important features of what may be defined as a command-and-control approach ('extensive, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context'). A related practice is when schools are provided with inducements to accept funds to implement programs determined at a system level in what is basically a carrot-and-stick approach. Carrot-and-stick is also an apt descriptor of practice when a higher level of government with more resources provides funds to a lower level of government with fewer resources and requires acceptance by the latter of strict terms and conditions that are not necessarily those that would have been accepted if there was no such dependence. This is a fair description of what has occurred in Australia in recent times.

An explanatory model

The Self-Transforming School (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013) included a model which explains how schools are being constrained in their efforts to be self-transforming, even to the point of flat-lining or regressing as far as student achievement is concerned.

The starting point in the development of an explanatory model was the identification of three dimensions, each of which provides a continuum on which schools, systems or whole nations may differ. One is the extent of school *autonomy*. While there are sound reasons for not using the concept of autonomy, it was employed because of its wide use. It refers to the extent to which a school has the authority and responsibility to make decisions within a centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities. Schools may have relatively low or relatively high levels of autonomy.

The second dimension is the extent of *control* over schools, which may be relatively tight or relatively loose. While there is a relationship between autonomy and control, it is possible for an authority to exercise relatively tight control over schools on important matters while they may have a high level of autonomy on others. The third dimension is the *outlook* of the

school or system, which may be relatively closed or relatively open, referring to the extent to which it is open to outside ideas and influences.

There are eight ways of classifying schools or system of schools on these dimensions, as illustrated in Table 1, and these are designated as types. Before explaining these it is important to note that they are broad classifications and there may be different ways of classifying a school or system of schools for different functions. Expressed another way, they may have the characteristics of more than one type.

Type 1: Low autonomy, high control, closed outlook In Type 1, schools have minimal authority and responsibility to make decisions in important matters and the system or other authority exerts tight control over their operations. The school is generally impervious to developments in its external environment. Type 1 may be a preferred approach if a sense of coherence and order is required to raise standards, especially if leaders have high levels of expertise. This is a classic command-and-control approach but ultimately unsustainable in a time of complexity and change.

Type 2: Low autonomy, high control, open outlook For Type 2, schools have minimal authority and responsibility to make decisions in important matters and the system or other authority exerts strong control over their operations. The school is open to new ideas from its external environment. Type 2 is a preferred approach if a sense of order and coherence is required to raise standards and leaders have a capacity to draw ideas from within and outside in times of complexity and change. While still command-and-control, Type 2 is likely to be more sustainable than Type 1.

Table 1: Schools and systems of schools classified by type according to autonomy, control and outlook

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O

Type 3: Low autonomy, low control, closed outlook Type 3 is likely to be a fragmented school or system of schools, making slow progress in building a sense of order and coherence. It does not seek ideas from outside. Things do not augur well for such a school or system.

Type 4: Low autonomy, low control, open outlook Prospects for the school or system are likely to be better under Type 4 than for Type 3 because, while leaders are open to new ideas, they continue to exert minimal control over staff and schools that have limited capacity to make decisions that may improve their lot.

Type 5: High autonomy, high control, closed outlook Type 5 involves a higher level of autonomy than Type 4, and a relatively high level of control may be appropriate where there is a need for a stronger sense of coherence and order. There is an opportunity for schools to make decisions that reflect their particular mix of needs and priorities. However, a closed outlook suggests that leaders are shielding themselves from learning about a better way to do things.

Type 6: High autonomy, high control, open outlook Type 6 may be more effective and sustainable than Type 5 if leaders are open to ideas from outside. The danger is maintaining elements of command-and-control for longer than necessary.

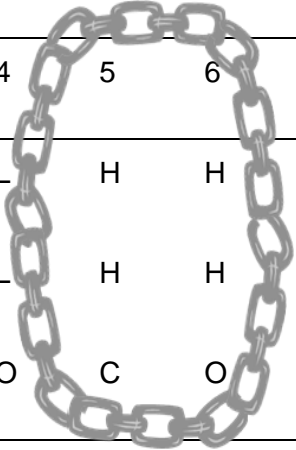
Type 7: High autonomy, low control, closed outlook Type 6 provides an opportunity to move from self-management to self-transformation as the chains of an excessive command-and-control approach are cast aside and schools have the capacity to take charge of their operations. The approach will be constrained to the extent that schools are shielded from ideas from outside.

Type 8: High autonomy, low control, open outlook Type 8 maximises the opportunity for self-transformation if schools have the capacity to take charge. Schools are open to developments from outside.

It is important to stress that these classifications are silent as far as capacities and outcomes are concerned. Whether schools are effective depends on their capacities and the kinds of support they receive.

A major source of concern is the extent to which a command-and-control approach is unnecessarily constraining the efforts of self-managing schools, or has been maintained if not strengthened beyond what is necessary to achieve coherence in a system that is focusing its efforts on improvement. An inappropriate ‘chaining’ of self-managing schools is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Chaining the self-managing school



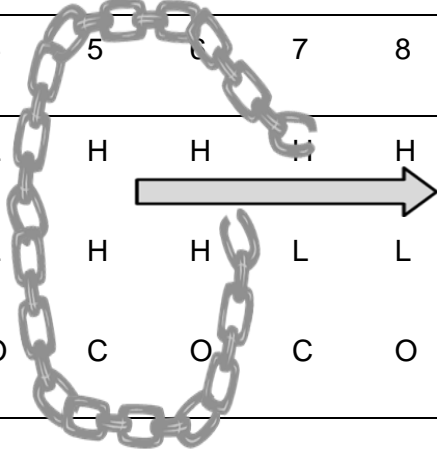
Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O

The appropriate response under these circumstances is to break the chain, as illustrated in Table 3. It is important to stress that the chain does not entirely disappear, for it is necessary to ensure transparency and accountability where funds are concerned. This ‘unchaining’ provides a window of opportunity, as it were, for many schools to move from self-management to self-transformation.

There is a strong case that schools in Australia have been constrained to Types 5 and 6 far longer than is warranted and that having two levels of government exercising control has been dysfunctional. As illustrated previously, states are well able to support schools in the shift to Types 7 and 8 without the involvement of the federal government, except for a contribution to funding. However, movement to Types 7 and 8 also calls for a response from state governments who should remove many of the constraints that have traditionally limited local discretion. It is noteworthy that New South Wales is doing so, with a significant reduction in the number of regulations that have unnecessarily ‘chained’ its public schools. According to the minister, ‘120 policies have been deleted or amalgamated’ (Piccoli, 2014: 6).

Table 3: From self-management to self-transformation

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O



Self-transformation as an experimentalist alternative

Schools with a well-developed capacity for self-transformation have characteristics that match the ‘experimentalist alternative’ described by Sabel and his colleagues, especially in respect to personalising learning, deep professional engagement and a relatively high level of school autonomy. They described the paths to experimentalist organisations in the following terms:

There are, very broadly speaking, at least two paths leading to the formation of experimentalist organizations providing individualized services. The first might be called the direct or natural path because it starts with and develops the professional tradition informing clinical social work, education and health care as this tradition emerged ‘naturally’ in Europe and the US in the early 20th century. It takes professionals as the independent flexible problem solvers they are trained to be and enhances their capacity to address a widening range of (more and more individual problems) by decentralizing authority within the large-scale organizations that typically employ them to regional and local levels, increasing the training and support available to individual practitioners, encouraging them to work in interdisciplinary teams, and introducing elements of peer review and dynamic accountability. (Sabel et al., 2010:17)

Sabel and colleagues made the connection to school autonomy, reflecting on how an ‘experimentalist exchange’ may operate in school districts in the United States where relatively few districts have the level of autonomy that has been achieved or is contemplated in some states in Australia. The following highlights the balance of autonomy and accountability:

At its core is an experimentalist exchange: ‘Lower’ – level units – state departments of education, school districts within states, schools within school districts and teachers within school – are accorded autonomy in choosing how to pursue general goals, but in return must provide rich information on the choices they make, and agree to assessment of their results, ideally by jointly agreed metrics periodically revised in the light of experience (Sabel et al., 2010: 50).

An experimentalist perspective on curriculum

Australia has a national curriculum for the first time in its history. Apart from an effort to meet the needs of an increasingly mobile population, its development is one of a range of strategies to help lift the performance of students. Developed by the Australian Curriculum,

Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) it was adopted with the support of all state and federal ministers for education. It is currently the subject of review.

Closer examination of delivery reveals that the national curriculum, as such, is not necessarily manifested in the learning experience of students in classrooms around the nation. Figure 1 illustrates the 'delivery chain', so to speak, with the national curriculum incorporated in state curricula, with adaptations to suit priorities in particular states, with further adaptation at the school level. Inevitably, teachers then tailor experiences to the needs of their students. Key questions are posed in Figure 1: 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? Achieving success for all students in all settings assumes an affirmative response to each of these questions.

Affirmative responses call for action in three 'policy domains', as illustrated in Figure 1. Policy Domain 1 calls for states to adapt the national curriculum to suit their circumstances. Policy Domain 2 requires states 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. These capacities have implications for policies in initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning, which takes us into a field of public policy in which the federal government should continue to have an interest.

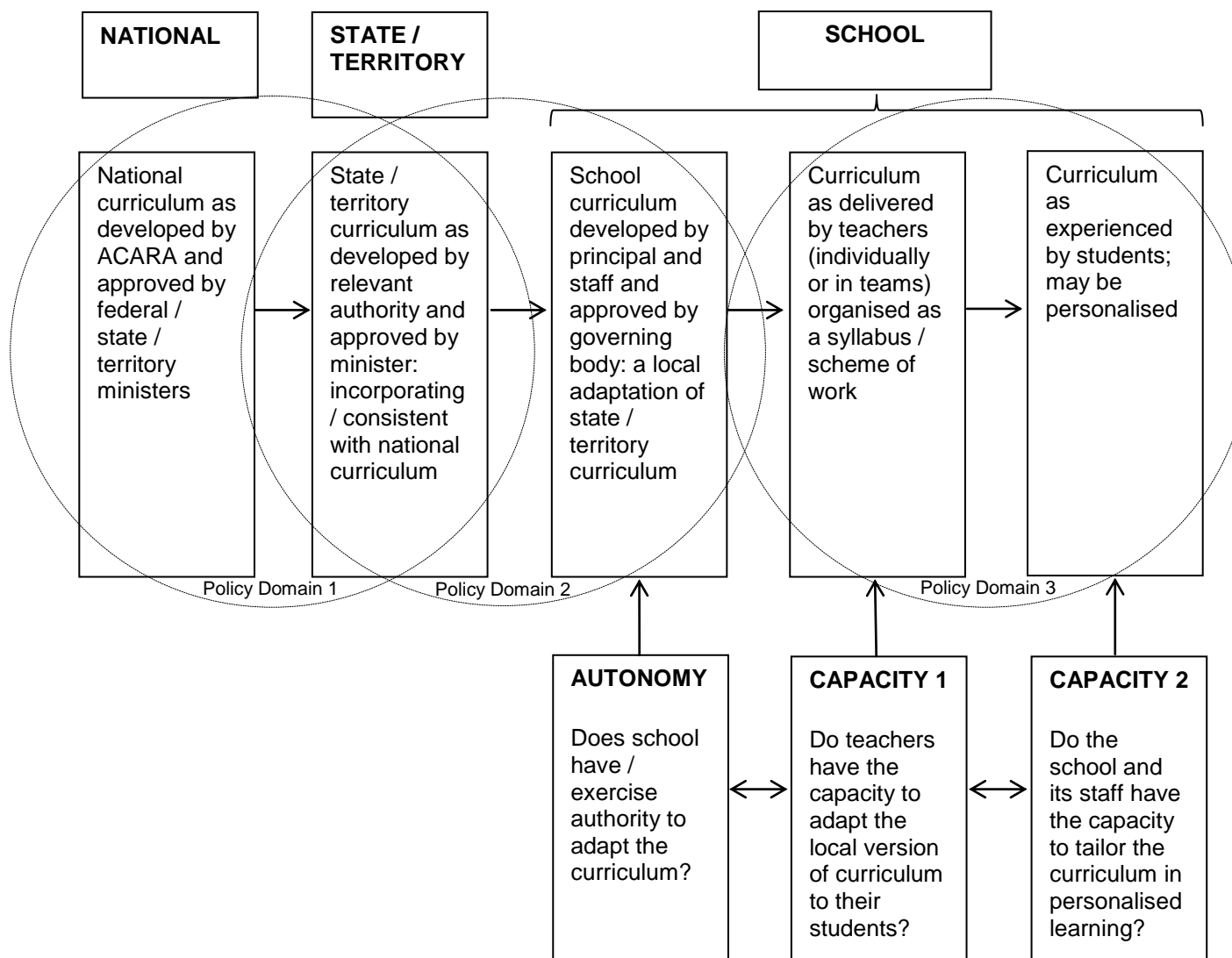
Apart from a contribution to funding, mechanisms for which are canvassed in the next section of this paper, there is no need for the involvement of the federal government in the process, given the realities of delivery illustrated in Figure 1. An agency such as ACARA can do its work in response to needs among states as agreed by a council of ministers. Governance arrangements for ACARA would change under these circumstances.

Commentary

Sabel (2004) analysed traditional hierarchical approaches to the delivery of services as well as variants of New Public Management. He considered experimentalist or pragmatic approaches that have emerged in recent years to be an improvement, and illustrated New Public Service Organizations by describing how they might work in school education, drawing on experience in several states in the US:

. . . the pragmatist solution to the problem of providing new public goods is to build an organization that detects and corrects errors at the lowest levels, and then adjusts the higher level structures to generalize successes and encourage more refined error detection, and so on. For example, all students learn to read by some idiosyncratic combination of decoding strings of letters/phonemes (phonics) and derivation of the meaning of words and sentences from context (whole language method). Teachers identify the strengths and weakness of each student's mixture of strategies by sampling their skills in brief, daily sessions, and suggest improvements (local diagnostic monitoring, or first-order error detection and correction). The performance of students in the same grade is measured periodically state wide by a standard test, allowing for the comparison of the performance of teachers within schools, schools, and districts (general diagnostic monitoring, or second-order error detection). The job of principals in this system is to create conditions in the school for generalizing the successes of the most successful teachers. The job of the principals' superior—the district supervisor—is to create conditions for diffusing the successes of the most successful principals, for example, by creating an academy for training aspirant principals in the new methods of school organization, or in providing programs in professional development by which more successful teachers within and across district school can help less successful ones. (Sabel, 2004: 184).

Figure 1: Analysing the flow of policy and practice in curriculum



The pragmatic or experimentalist approach described here by Sabel is similar to what is illustrated in Figure 1, except that there should be more scope for moving from right to left rather than left to right – reversing the direction of the arrows. His description is for action from the bottom up, so to speak, rather than the top down traditional approach.

Sabel referred to the role of parliament in the following terms, acknowledging that more needs to be done / known to be assured that the approach is feasible:

So parliament in experimentalist democracy retains its centrality as that body most able to make the most comprehensive commitments to give effect to public values, and to reassess those commitments, values, and means of effecting them. Whether parliament is able to make more effective use of this centrality in experimentalism than it has of late in principal/agent governance depends naturally on whether the new administration can actually shift from rule making to the facilitation of pragmatist learning, and do this in a way that makes the civil society actors accountable to parliament even as they are to make themselves accountable. We are a long way from knowing whether such a vast reorientation will be undertaken, let alone succeed. (Sabel, 2004: 191-192)

Mechanism to distribute federal funds

The current Commission of Audit may be a major influence in triggering a retreat in school education on the part of the federal government, although the track record on recommendations for a realignment of powers is not good. The Howard Government did not take up the recommendations of the National Commission of Audit to transfer areas of policy such as education to the states (see Jones and Prasser, 2014 for an account of commissions of audit in Australia).

It is apparent that state governments have the capacities to fashion a program of reform. However, they are dependent on funds from the federal government. The current vertical fiscal imbalance would be dramatically reduced if states had the power to increase their revenue along similar lines as provinces in Canada (income tax, sales tax, revenue from mining). The imbalance would be reduced if states in Australia had access to other revenue such as an increase in the rate of GST. A more likely possibility is if the federal government agrees to vacate the field of public policy on school education and deliver the revenue to the states.

One mechanism is to establish an entity along the lines of a school funding agency or commission that is charged with the responsibility of allocating federal funds to the states and organisations representing Catholic and independent schools. This would require the federal government to determine a quantum of funds for, say, the next quadrennium, for distribution along these lines. Such an agency would be an independent standing authority that would determine the basis for distribution. Members of such an authority should include people with extensive experience in funding for schools, supported by a small staff. The quantum might cover the costs of operating entities such as ACARA and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), which might henceforth be owned exclusively by the states. The agency would not receive applications for grants outside these purposes.

Conclusion

This paper is sub-titled 'Energising an experimentalist approach'. This makes clear that a diminished role for the federal government is just one strategy in what ought to be a sequence, as illustrated in Figure 1 for curriculum. States must provide schools with significant authority, responsibility and accountability, and schools must in turn ensure that teachers have the professional autonomy to respond to the needs, interests, aptitudes and passions of their students, assuming that they have the capacities to do so. There is a paradox in a situation in which federal governments have, as they have often done, adopted a 'command-and-control' approach to what should occur in schools and, at the same time,

have advocated a higher level of school autonomy. It is time to achieve a higher level of coherence in public policy on the governance of schools in Australia.

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