

School Improvement Episode 8: Professional autonomy with Brian...

Jo Earp

Thank you for downloading this episode of the School Improvement podcast series, brought to you by Teacher magazine – I'm Jo Earp. My guest for this episode is Professor Brian Caldwell, Professor Emeritus at the University of Melbourne and Deputy Chair of ACARA (the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority). His new book [The Autonomy Premium](#), published by ACER Press, explores the link between student achievement and autonomy in school management and professional practice and includes case studies of Australia government schools. I caught up with him in Melbourne to find out more.

Jo Earp: Professor Brian Caldwell, welcome to *Teacher magazine*. In *The Autonomy Premium*, that's your new book, you say that professional autonomy trumps structural autonomy. Can you just explain what you mean by that?

Brian Caldwell: Over the last few decades schools, especially public schools, have been given more authority to make their own decisions on a range of matters. The question has often been asked: Does this make any difference to learning outcomes for students? Well, what we've found from research and detailed studies of schools that are using this additional autonomy is that just giving schools more authority may make no difference at all if schools don't have a capacity to make good decisions in the interests of their students.

So, we distinguish between professional autonomy and structural autonomy in this way. Structural autonomy is just the changes in policies and procedures that give the school more authority. Professional autonomy means that schools have the knowledge and skills to actually use that additional authority to make those decisions. If teachers know and have a good body of practical knowledge that's evidence-based about how to make a difference to students, and actually make decisions using that additional authority, then we're likely to see an improvement for students.

In that way we say, in the book, that professional autonomy trumps structural autonomy.

JE: So, let's delve a bit deeper into that idea of professional autonomy then. What do schools do when they exercise this professional autonomy?

BC: There are a number of building blocks to this. The first is that teachers, and school leaders, know a lot about how to improve student learning. And we've gained enormously from sharing research and practice in the last few years here. So, knowing what makes a difference in terms of how students learn is probably the most important building block when schools exercise professional autonomy. This means knowing what factors, what strategies, make a big difference and what

strategies make little or no difference.

It's knowledge that teachers and schools have built enormously in recent years. We've always had professional development for teachers, we've had what used to be called 'in-service training' but now we've got a profession that is gaining access to, participating in, studies and sharing their knowledge, working in groups, working in teams based upon learning areas.

There are a number of other things too that go with professional autonomy. Schools have to know how to set priorities for their students and there are a host of priorities that schools can address, but what are the most important ones given that each school is really quite unique in terms of the mix of its students and the communities that it serves. So, knowing what is the most important thing to address now and in the short- to medium-term future is critically important. So, setting priorities.

It also means having the best mix of teachers to address those priorities and those needs. So, schools having a capacity to select and then build the capacities of teachers is critically important. Schools now, more than they've ever had, have a budget of money that has been decentralised to the school from a school system, if it's a public education or a systemic non-government school. So, knowing how to target the money to best address those priorities is also critically important.

Then there's the ongoing day-to-day way in which teachers work. That means teachers being able to work together in teams, people who are teaching in the same subject area or at the same grade level, sharing their knowledge, getting out and about to conferences, participating in professional learning to really build in each school a genuine professional learning community.

JE: There's actually a link then between professional autonomy and these higher levels of student achievement. What kind of evidence do you look at in the book?

BC: Well, there's that broad base of international research in recent years but what we did in 2015 was to conduct case studies in Australia – five of them in fact. Four of them were schools nominated by school system leaders as schools that had had autonomy for several years, had dramatically improved learning outcomes for students, and that the system leaders felt that the schools would have available some evidence that would enable us to explore the possible links between school autonomy and outcomes for students.

We were able to select from a number of nominations, three schools in Victoria, one in the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) and one in Queensland. One of those schools was also a school that had done a really good job in developing what are often called 21st century skills – and this was a senior secondary school and it had been working on that agenda for a number of years, in fact, well over a decade.

So, we asked principals and other school leaders to explain to us, give us the detail, step by step: Who did what? With what resources? When did they do it? How did they work together? What were the problems they encountered in making school-level decisions? And what evidence can they provide that it actually made a difference for students?

Of course, we used improvements on NAPLAN scores compared to all schools and compared to similar schools but we also had access to other evidence where schools

had a broad range of goals and we asked schools for evidence that those goals had been achieved. The end result of this was that for each of the schools we were able to map in diagrammatic form the links between that professional autonomy and improved outcomes for students.

JE: Now, on the flipside of course, what are the kinds of things that are blocking professional autonomy? What would be standing in the way?

BC: Well, the obvious one would be if schools hadn't built the capacity to make good decisions in the interests of their students. But there's also evidence, and we've reported this in a report of a survey we did of school principals around Australia [[What the Principals Say](#)], but jurisdictions are also finding the same thing when they commission reports on what might be blocking the kind of improvement they'd like to see.

The biggest one that we've been able to identify is the mountain of work that seems to distract principals and teachers from focusing on learning. So, there's a mountain of paperwork, or compliance requirements, or filling out forms; there's no question that this is seen as the major distraction for principals at least but I'd suspect also for a considerable number of teachers as well. Hour upon hour of work that might be important, in terms of meeting workplace health and safety, but there's a lot of other information that's collected that's not really used, not really important.

Some principals have cited the demands of national or state curriculum, or the demands of having students sit NAPLAN tests every year. But, interestingly, in the schools that we looked at these weren't seen as stumbling blocks, schools were simply able to connect those larger, bigger-picture agendas to the local work of the school.

JE: So, finally then, we've discussed professional autonomy today. Will it make a difference to the overall performance of Australia's students in the long run? Is it an important factor in that respect?

BC: It's one factor. Some people have often criticised work related to professional autonomy or autonomy in general as though it were being presented as a silver bullet that would lead to huge gains in improvement, not only for the individual student but also for the nation. And that's not true – it ought not be claimed to be a silver bullet. It's one factor.

The other factors of course relate to initial teacher education, to ensure that new teachers that are employed are at the forefront of knowledge and skills, that's an important factor. The particular setting that the school finds itself in or is serving is also a factor. Some schools are in highly challenging, disadvantaged settings and they require special support ... for the school itself in exercising its decision-making powers. And the system itself must ensure that there's what we broadly call a needs-based approach to funding schools and resourcing schools also has to be in place.

And all of these things require time to have an impact. The climate of the school must change, the culture of the school must change as well.

That's all for this episode of School Improvement. For more on this topic, check out the podcast transcript and related reading at our website www.teachermagazine.com.au. To download all of our podcasts for free, visit acer.ac/teacheritunes or www.soundcloud.com/teacher-acer.