Postmodern Openings

The System of Local Management of Schools in the UK - Achieving an Optimal Balance of Centralization and Decentralization in Education

Arthur DAVIES

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://postmodernopenings.com

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

The System of Local Management of Schools in the UK - Achieving an Optimal Balance of Centralization and Decentralization in Education

Ph.D. Arthur DAVIES[1] [2]

Abstract

This article draws from UK experience where there have been changes in the balance of centralization and decentralization in efforts to enhance the quality of education. Particular attention is given to school autonomy (local management of schools), school choice and the private role in state education management. Successful experience is analysed, guidelines are formulated to assist those seeking to introduce such strategies. Further research areas are identified. The context for centralization and decentralization is shaped by patterns of governance. In the UK , where the national government has the authority to make policies in education, decentralization has referred to a shift in authority from national government to schools. This article describes the current reform strategies from centralization to decentralization as 'experimenting with school choice and greater autonomy to build all students' enthusiasm for learning, as well as standardization and school accountability to ensure all students' mastery of core content'.

Keywords:

Megatrends; Autonomy; Driving forces; Impact on learning; Choice; Private funding

---

[1] Dr. Arthur DAVIES PhD, M.Ed, BA, PGCE, MICPM, MIOD, Chairman, Quality Management Services (UK) Ltd; office@qmsukltd.co.uk, Member of Education Business Partnership for Entrepreneurship Education Development

Introduction

This article draws from experience in the UK where there have been changes in the balance of centralization and decentralization in efforts to enhance the quality of education. Particular attention is given to school autonomy (local management of schools), school choice and a private role in the management of public education. Successful experience is analysed and guidelines are formulated to assist those who seek to introduce or extend such strategies.

The context for centralization and decentralization is shaped to some extent by patterns of governance. In the UK, where the national government has the authority to make decisions in education, decentralization has referred to a shift in authority from the national and local government direct to schools.

1. Megatrends in the Uk Education System

The UK framework describes the current reform strategies in centralization and decentralization as "experimenting with school choice and greater autonomy to build all students' enthusiasm for learning, as well as standardization and school accountability to ensure all students' mastery of core content". These strategies are described as 'megatrends'. There are ten megatrends in current day education implementation in the UK, which act as the 'cornerstone' of the education provision:

- There is a powerful but sharply focused role for central authorities, especially in respect to formulating goals, setting priorities, and building frameworks for accountability.
- National and global considerations have become increasingly important, especially in respect to curriculum and an education system that is responsive to national needs within a global economy.
- Within centrally determined frameworks, state schools have become largely self-managing, and distinctions between state and private schools have narrowed.
- There is an unparalleled concern for the provision of a quality education for each individual.
- There is a dispersion of the educative function, with telecommunications and computer technology ensuring that much learning that currently occurs in schools or in institutions of higher education will occur at home and in the workplace.
- The basics of education have been expanded to include problem solving, creativity and a capacity for life-long and life wide learning and re-learning.

- There is an expanded role for the arts and spirituality, defined broadly in each instance; there is a high level of 'connectedness' in the curriculum.
- Women have claimed their place among the ranks of leaders in education, including those at the most senior levels.
- The parent and community role in education has been claimed, supported and reinforced
- There is unparalleled concern for service by those who are required or have the opportunity to support the work of schools.

2. School Autonomy

Successive UK governments have encouraged greater autonomy at the school level, through legislation at national level. The term 'school autonomy' is not widely used in the UK. There is a general preference for 'Local Management of Schools', which has the widest currency. Much of the literature on the subject of 'school autonomy' has drawn from the United Kingdom and other economies in Europe.

Propositions and themes
Presented below are propositions that summarise what has been learned from effective and ineffective practices in the UK, suggesting why some experiences have been more successful than others, and offering guidelines for success where there is an intention to introduce or extend the practice. Account is taken of needs of schools and school systems in challenging circumstances, either socio-economic or location. The propositions are organised in eight themes:

i) Definition of local management of schools
School-based management in a system of state education is the systematic and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities.

ii) Scope and scale
Systems differ in the scope of the 'significant matters related to school operations' for which decisions have been decentralized and the scope and specificity of the 'centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities'.

93

DAVIES, A., (2011) The System of Local Management of Schools in the UK
Achieving an Optimal Balance of Centralization and Decentralization in Education,
Postmodern Openings, Year 2, No. 5, Vol. 5, March, Year 2011

School-based management has been evident in policy and practice for more than two decades. There are three major tracks in public education in the UK: the building of systems of self-managing schools; an unrelenting focus on learning outcomes; and the creation of schools for a knowledge society and global economy

iii) Theory of centralization and decentralization

In theory and in practice, centralization and decentralization are in tension, with centralization indicated when the values of control, uniformity and efficiency are in ascendance, and decentralization indicated when freedom, differentiation, and responsiveness are preferred. Whether centralization or decentralization is better if innovation is sought is uncertain. **The challenge is to achieve a balance** of centralization and decentralization, depending on what values are preferred, or are required, and the capacities of people at different levels to carry out their respective functions.

iv) Driving forces for school-based management

Driving forces for school-based management are varied. They include (1) demand for less control and uniformity and associated demand for greater freedom and differentiation; (2) interest in reducing the size and therefore cost of maintaining a large central bureaucracy; (3) commitment to empowerment of the community; (4) desire to achieve higher levels of professionalism at the school level through the involvement of teachers in decision-making; and (5) realization that different schools have different mixes of student needs requiring different patterns of response that cannot be determined centrally, hence the need for a capacity at the school level to make decisions to respond to these needs.

School-based management has been contentious because different driving forces have shaped policy and these have often reflected political preference or ideological orientation. School-based management driven by concern for empowerment of the community and enhancement of the profession has often been associated with governments of the left. School-based management that has been driven by an interest in greater freedom or more differentiation has often been associated with governments of the right, with school-based management sometimes seen as a manifestation of efforts to create a market among schools in systems of public education.

In the final analysis, even though other driving forces may have been at work, a critical criterion for judging the effectiveness of reform that includes school-based management is the extent to which it leads to or is associated with the achievement of improved educational outcomes, including higher levels of

student achievement, however measured. In recent times, there has been an alignment of views that a primary purpose for school-based management is the improvement of educational outcomes and, for this reason; most governments have included it in their policies for educational reform. It is becoming less contentious.

v) Impact on learning

For much of the three decades of experience with the approach, there has been little evidence that school-based management has had either a direct or an indirect effect on educational outcomes. Critics have frequently seized on this finding. However, much of the early research was drawing on information or opinion from systems where impact on outcomes was never a primary or even a secondary purpose. This was particularly the case when school-based management was implemented as a strategy for dismantling large, costly and unresponsive central bureaucracies or as a strategy to empower the community and the professional. Even when impact on outcomes became a primary purpose it was difficult to draw conclusions on impact because of the weak database on student achievement.

A review of research suggests that there have been three generations of studies and it is only in the third that evidence of impact on outcomes has emerged, and then only when certain conditions are fulfilled. The first generation was in times when impact on outcomes was not a primary or even secondary purpose. The second generation was when such purposes may have been to the fore, but the database was weak. The third, emerging in the late 1990s and gathering momentum in the early 2000s, coincides with a pre-eminent concern for learning outcomes and the development of a strong database

Many of the more constrained approaches to school-based management, have also yielded little evidence of impact on learning, In the 'Creating learning communities for children' policy, School-based management was just one of four strategies: (1) providing each school with its own budget, (2) conducting professional development programmes for teachers on new approaches to curriculum and teaching, (3) engaging in community development to encourage parents to support their schools, and (4) re-invigorating the school experience for students, or expressing it more bluntly, making it worthwhile for them to come to school through an initiative known as 'Active Effective Learning' (AEL). Dramatic improvements were evident within 12 months, notably in rates of attendance and in test results. The concept of 'Active Effective Learning' is an engaging one and is consistent with the focus on 'students' enthusiasm for learning'.

Recent case study research has shown the direct and indirect links between school-based management and learning outcomes. These have

highlighted the importance of local decision-making being pre-eminently concerned with learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching, especially in building the capacity of staff to design and deliver a curriculum and pedagogy that meets the needs of students, taking account of priorities in the local setting, including a capacity to identify needs and monitor outcomes. Also evident is the building of the capacity of the community to support the efforts of schools. Expressed another way, the introduction of school-based management may have no impact on learning unless these measures, broadly described as capacity building and capacity utilisation, have been successful.

At a macro-level, studies of student achievement have confirmed the importance of a balance of centralization and decentralization, with a relatively high level of school-based management being one element of decentralization, including local decision-making on matters concerned with personnel, professionalism, monitoring of outcomes, and the building of community support. Building the support of the community reflects the importance of social capital. Social capital refers to the strength of mutually supportive relationships among school, home, community, church, business and industry, and other agencies in the public and private sectors.

Experience suggests that, no matter how strong the strategic intention, it may take several years for a shift in the balance of centralization and decentralization in favour of the latter to have impact on outcomes. It is one thing to pass legislation shifting power, authority, responsibility and influence from one level to another – such a shift is a change in structure. It is another thing to build commitment and capacity to achieve the desired impact on learning – such a shift is a change in culture.

vi) Impact at Government level

The change in culture that is required at the centre is just as powerful as the change in culture that is required in schools. While an initiative in school-based management is usually an initiative of government and the most senior leaders in a school system, government personnel frequently resist the change, for they perceive and indeed experience a loss of power, authority, responsibility and influence Forces that may drive a return to centralization may soon appear. This did not occur in the UK because there was appreciation that the change called for an increase in power, authority, responsibility and influence in matters related to the centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities. There remains a need to provide strong central government support for schools. Building capacity at the centre to do these things well is just as important as building capacity at the school level.

vii) Models for resource allocation

An important feature of school-based management is the decentralization of budget to the school level. The argument in favour is that responding to the unique mix of student learning needs at the school level calls for a unique mix of resources of all kinds, and that it is no longer possible for such a mix to be determined by central government, whether it be for the standard allocation of staff or the determination of how money should be spent on supplies, equipment and services. UK school systems have decentralized to the school level decisions related to the allocation of more than 90 percent of the state budget for public school education. The challenge under these circumstances is to design an appropriate resource allocation model that will distribute resources in a fair and transparent way, ensuring that schools have a 'global budget' that enables them to resource efforts to meet the unique mix of local learning needs. This task took several years, with continual refinement based on experience and changes in policy.

The UK resource allocation model takes account of the number of students, level of schooling, special education needs, and the location of the school. It is important to note, however, that not every circumstance can be covered by a formula, especially in low achieving schools in particularly challenging socio-economic environments. The level and mix of resources under these conditions are achieved on a case-by-case basis.

viii) Capacity building

Capacity building at the local level is a key theme in successful experience of school-based management. For teachers, this has taken the form of professional development that deals with such topics as needs assessment, curriculum design, research-based pedagogy, and continuous monitoring. For head-teachers and other leaders at the school level, these topics are also relevant, but others are essential, including strategic leadership, human resource management, policy making, planning, resource allocation, community building and networking among schools and other organizations in the private and public sectors that can support the work of schools, including those in health. Building these capacities is important for creating what some have called a 'new professionalism' in education that is research-based, data-oriented, team-focused and outcomes-driven. In these respects, the education profession is taking on the characteristics of the medical profession, where continuous lifelong learning is an expectation and a pre-condition for accreditation and re-accreditation.

These needs give rise to the new field of knowledge management in schools. This refers to building the intellectual capital of the school, and involves the creation, dissemination and utilisation of professional knowledge that takes account of a rapidly expanding knowledge base, and the need for

access to that base in a timely and easily understandable manner. Extensive use of information and communications technology and the design of an intranet at the school level aids the effort. Postgraduate programs in knowledge management are now emerging to take their place with programmes in human resource development, financial management, curriculum and pedagogy. Universities have an important role in building capacity and undertaking research on the processes and outcomes of school-based management. These are best conceived as partnerships with schools and school systems. Also important are national initiatives such as the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom.

3. School Choice

There are six values underpinning these strategies for education reform in the UK:

Choice to reflect the right of parents and students to choose a school within the LEA that meets their needs and aspirations; not necessarily their 'catchment school'. Choice of school is now seen as a fundamental parental right in the UK.

Equity to provide assurance that those students with similar needs and aspirations will be treated in the same manner in the course of their education

Access to ensure all students will have an education that matches their needs and aspirations

Efficiency to optimize outcomes given the resources available

Economic growth to generate resources that are adequate to the task

Harmony to secure and sustain the support of all stakeholders

The first three are a variation of the classic set of liberty (choice), equality (equity) and fraternity (access), with the characteristics of good governance reflected in the fourth and fifth (efficiency and economic growth). The sixth (harmony) also reflects a desire on the part of the government and is a highly treasured value in the Confucian tradition.

Specialist schools in the UK

The approach in the UK in recent years is the 'specialist schools' initiative at secondary level, and this is attracting attention in a number of countries. Commencing in the Thatcher years with just 15 city technology colleges, at 31 December 2008 there were 1,646 specialist secondary schools, representing 54 percent all secondary schools. Success has led to it becoming a major item in the Government's re-election agenda under Gordon Brown. Facilitating the development is the Specialist Schools Trust and its network of over 2,200 affiliated schools (see www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk).

Ten specialisms are encouraged: arts, technology, languages, sports, business and enterprise, engineering, mathematics and computing, science, humanities and music. A new category of rural schools is to be included. Schools are still required to address the national curriculum in each key learning area. The important feature is the development of specialization or areas of excellence in one or more of the nominated areas. These secondary schools, now clearly constituting a critical mass in the UK, may be found in every setting, with as many in low as in high socio-economic areas.

Specialist schools consistently outperform non-specialist schools in terms of success of students in the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and this finding applies in all socio-economic settings. In the most recent study of outcomes (Jesson, 2009) it was found that results for pupils at specialist schools are improving three times faster than those in other comprehensives, with children of average or below average ability making the greatest progress. Inner-city comprehensives with the highest levels of pupil poverty also improved more rapidly if they were specialist schools.

A large network of specialist schools is known as Vision 2020 and this has become the 'innovation arm' of the Specialist Schools Trust. The 2,200 affiliated schools are formed into regions, with each region having an innovation budget. There is a strong culture of sharing good practice in these networks. A striking initiative is the establishment of a program of leadership development for 'leaders of tomorrow' – those in the first five years of teaching appointment. Features include the leadership of the programme by successful head-teachers, a network of mentor support, seminars with leading educationists, and work-related projects. In terms of rate of growth and impact, a case can be made that the specialist schools movement in the UK is one of the most significant developments in secondary education in any nation, and more so than the magnet schools movement in the United States.

4. A Private Role in the Management of Public Education

A private role in the management of public education is an element in the education reform agenda of the UK. There are five inter-related arguments that are advanced for a private role in the management of public schools or, more broadly, for public private partnerships in education. These are the failure of a public authority to meet expectations, securing higher levels of funding, a 'third way' in the delivery of services to the public, the building of social capital, and the transformation of public sector services in a knowledge society

A relatively detailed account of developments in the United Kingdom is provided because factors associated with their relative success may be helpful in other places where similar strategies are under consideration.

Public private partnerships in the United Kingdom

The private role in the management of public schools in the United Kingdom takes three forms:

i) Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) to accelerate the re-building or major refurbishment of school buildings,

ii) The creation of City Academies to replace secondary schools that have performed poorly, and

iii) Private management of a school that in other ways operates as a typical public school. In some instances, all three roles are evident in the operation of a single school.

i) Private Finance Initiatives (PFI)

The Conservative Government introduced Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) in the early 1990s. Under PFI, construction and refurbishment of schools are funded and implemented by private companies after which the school is leased back to the public authority (LEA) usually for 25 years. These companies maintain the schools and draw profits from the lease arrangements. Proponents of PFI contend that it is a better approach than securing a substantial injection of public funds over a short term, a course of action that will require higher taxes. They also draw attention to the benefit that principals are not required to manage the facilities under these arrangements, thus allowing them to focus on educational leadership. PFI have expanded dramatically under the Labour Government that shares the concern of local education authorities about the rapid deterioration of buildings that were designed many decades, even centuries ago for a different era of schooling. The largest PFI is in Scotland where all 29 secondary schools in Glasgow are either new or have been radically modernised.

ii) City Academies

A major project of the Blair Government was to establish City Academies that involve the closure, re-opening, re-naming and physical re-building of secondary schools in cities across the UK.

The 'abandoned' schools are seen as having failed their communities despite the various 'special measures' that have been taken to achieve improvement. One or more of the following elements are evident:

i) A contribution from the non-public sector of funds in the re-building programme

ii) Significant philanthropic support, or

iii) The management of the new school by a non-public entity, either profit or non-profit.

At the time of writing, 12 academies have been opened and 25 more are in the planning stage. The intention is to establish 50 over the next few years, all in communities marked by poor educational performance. The Government invoked a social justice argument in proceeding down this path.

iii) Private management of public schools

How can the apparent success of these private roles in the UK be explained? It is an issue that is worthy of further research.

Reasons might include:

The more comprehensive collection of strategies within a relatively coherent overall policy framework for education reform;

The extensive experience of the major private companies engaged in the private management of schools, with many of the key personnel being respected educational leaders; well-established practice in school-based management;

The absence of constitutional constraints in respect to public support for non-public schools;

The clear and consistent support of leaders across the political spectrum, especially the very visible support of Prime Ministers (both current and previous).

These reasons are offered as guidelines for consideration in all settings where private roles in the management of public schools are contemplated. Initial concern about a private role in the management of state schools largely dissipated once it was realised that the key personnel were highly successful if not eminent educators in their own right.

The range of public private partnerships in England, and their apparent success and growing acceptance in circumstances where virtually all other measures have been tried but have failed, suggest that this trend will expand in the future

Conclusion

In the UK there have been changes in the balance of centralization and decentralization in efforts to enhance the quality of education. Particular attention has been given to school autonomy (local management of schools), school choice and the private role in state education management.

These current reform strategies in centralization and decentralization are described as 'megatrends'. There are ten megatrends in current day education implementation in the UK, which act as the 'cornerstone' of the education provision

The context for centralization and decentralization is shaped by patterns of governance. In the UK, where the national government has the authority to make policies in education, decentralization has referred to a shift in authority from national government to schools with the purpose to build all students' enthusiasm for learning, as well as standardization and school accountability to ensure all students' mastery of core content'.

The jury is still in deliberation!

References

Bentley, T. and Miller, R. (2003) *Possible Futures: Four Scenarios for Schooling in 2030*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Belfield, C. R. and Levin, H. M. (2003) Education Privatization: Causes, Consequences and Planning Implication. *IIEP Fundamentals of Educational Planning* No. 74. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) – UNESCO.

Duff, O. (2007) Adapt or face collapse, schools warned. *The Guardian*. March 28.

Farrell, M. (2008a) Popular schools at risk of closure. *Times Educational Supplement*. 26.09 p. 1.

Fullan, M. and Watson, N. (2006) School-based management: Re-conceptualizing to improve learning outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. Vol. 11, No 4, pp. 453 – 474.

Jesson, D. (2009) *Educational Outcomes and Value Added by Specialist Schools*. London: Specialist Schools Trust.

Owen, G. (2009) The secret of success is in the teaching. *The Times*. 15 January.