

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Heikkinen, Hannu L. T.; Wilkinson, Jane; Bristol, Laurette

Title: Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy : School principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica

Year: 2021

Version: Published version

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis

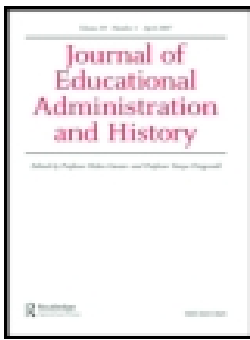
Rights: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Heikkinen, H. L. T., Wilkinson, J., & Bristol, L. (2021). Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy : School principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 53(3-4), 198-214.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1849060>



Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy: school principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica

Hannu L. T. Heikkinen, Jane Wilkinson & Laurette Bristol

To cite this article: Hannu L. T. Heikkinen, Jane Wilkinson & Laurette Bristol (2021): Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy: school principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica, Journal of Educational Administration and History, DOI: [10.1080/00220620.2020.1849060](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1849060)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1849060>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Three orientations for understanding educational autonomy: school principals' voices from Australia, Finland, and Jamaica

Hannu L. T. Heikkinen ^a, Jane Wilkinson ^b and Laurette Bristol ^c

^aFinnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland; ^bFaculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; ^cCaribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, Guyana, South America

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings from a multi-site case study conducted in Australia, Finland and Jamaica which explored the conditions that enabled and constrained the autonomy of school principals. Systematic data collection was carried out in the form of interviews of school principals and the data was analysed using a qualitative approach. The analysis indicates that: (1) school principals' practices are prefigured by the peculiarities of historical trajectories and ideological traditions enmeshed in schooling sites; (2) these prefiguring arrangements in turn influence varying realisations of autonomous decision making practices across national sites; and (3) even in the expression of high/low levels of autonomy, there are contradictory and contested practices. Through the analysis, three different orientations to autonomy were found: a *neoliberal market orientation*, a *professional practice orientation* and an *educational praxis orientation*.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 8 May 2020
Accepted 6 November 2020

KEYWORDS

School autonomy;
professional autonomy;
professional development;
professional learning;
educational leadership;
praxis

1. Introduction

Autonomy of teachers and schools has been conceptualised in various ways, from multiple perspectives and for different purposes. Firstly, the concept of autonomy is familiar in discussions about teacher professionalism (e.g. McPeck and Sanders 1974; Darling-Hammond 1990; Whitty 2000). In the early phases of the teaching profession, autonomy was viewed as the element that distinguished professional from proletarian work (Hargreaves 2000, 152). In this sense, autonomous professionalism in teaching was characterised by rational thinking, emotional commitment and autonomous ethical considerations. Teacher autonomy has also been interpreted in specific ways by teacher trade unions in terms of the promotion of the collective interests of teachers. From this perspective, teachers form a collective group for lobbying and bargaining for better salaries and working conditions (e.g. Konings 2006; Stevenson 2003). In recent decades, the concept of autonomy has been employed in a new and quite

CONTACT Hannu L. T. Heikkinen  hannu.l.t.heikkinen@ju.fi  Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.fi/citations?user=zGrCROQAAAAJ&hl=fi&oi=ao>

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

different way which foregrounds the unfettered competition of autonomous actors in a free market. From this point of view, schools are supposed to act like private enterprises, forming self-regulatory entities that operate and compete with each other with the goals of achieving better quality and cost efficiency of educational practices through market mechanisms (Hangartner and Svaton 2013). This application of New Public Management (NPM) is also manifested through the concept of School Based Management (SBM) (De Grauwe 2005). From this neoliberal perspective, autonomy is often described in terms of resource allocation. Indicators of school autonomy may include the recruitment and dismissal of teachers, increases to teachers' salaries, and deciding on budget allocations within schools (Ikeda 2011, 3).

The preceding sketch suggests that the concept of autonomy arises in different political, geographical and social settings and is rooted in different cultural and historical traditions. Its differing origins and varied manifestations reveal that the underlying justification *of* and *for* autonomy in education remains deeply contested. The purpose of this article then is to highlight these differing traditions through a comparative case study of the site-based conditions that enabled and constrained autonomous decision-making practices in schools in Finland, Australia and Jamaica. Each of these nations has distinct histories and varying understandings of school autonomy.

Typically, comparison starts with a recognition of what is common and the ways in which a consideration of the common gives rise to the particular. In this instance, the researchers started with a shared interest in the conditions which enabled and constrained practices of autonomy in schools across their nations. The sites of practices which define the cases are fundamentally different in terms of economic status, historical conditions, ethnic composition and geographic location. This illustrates a practice of autonomy as emerging from contrapuntal conditions. The significance of this is not a determination of a value judgement on constructions of autonomy, but to illustrate the site-based conditions that prefigure particular practices of autonomy.

Drawing on interviews with principals in each country, we explore their interpretations and understandings of autonomy, and the site-based conditions which they perceived had enabled and/or constrained their autonomous decision-making practices. The focus of our empirical study is on principals because school leaders play a key role in interpreting and determining the autonomy of schools within local, regional and national decision-making and political will-formation. We conclude the article with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our inquiry, particularly in terms of reclaiming understandings of autonomy in education beyond current hegemonic discourses of the market.

2. Philosophical and theoretical analysis: autonomy as *praxis*

The key concept introduced in this article is a *praxis orientation to autonomy* which is juxtaposed with *market* and *professional orientations* to autonomy. In order to understand the concept of a *praxis orientation to autonomy*, we need to familiarise ourselves with the etymological backgrounds of the words *autonomy* and *praxis*, as well as some discussions in western philosophy that we consider to be crucial in terms of our study. The most important landmarks for us are Aristotle in the Ancient Greece, the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and the Marxian critical theory of the early 1900s.

The concept of autonomy originates from the ancient Greek words *auto* (self) and *nomos* (laws or rules). Thus, autonomy originally meant operating according to laws that one has made for oneself. This expression was used for a town-state (*polis*) that instituted its own laws. In an autonomous *polis*, the laws were discussed and established by the citizens of that particular *polis*. The concept of autonomy has been further applied and developed in Western intellectual traditions. For our purposes, it is pivotal to note how the concept of autonomy became one of the central concepts of Enlightenment philosophy. The concept was particularly significant for Immanuel Kant, who urged human beings ‘to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another’ (Kant 2013, 1). From this perspective, autonomy was the ability to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are one’s own, rather than the product of irrational or manipulative external forces (Christman 2018, 1).

The second element of *praxis orientation to autonomy* is the concept of praxis. In order to better understand the concept of *praxis*, we must first briefly review the three main dispositions to knowledge in Aristotle’s philosophy. *Epistēmē* is the disposition which aims at achieving pure knowledge. The knowing subject has no other aims or aspirations than solely knowing how things are (Aristotle 2011, 1139a27–8). The form of human action informed by *epistēmē* is *theoria*. In other words, *theoria* is what people *do* when they attain universal knowledge about the nature of things in the world, seeking truth by processing information that they access through their senses.

According to Aristotle (2011, 1139a27–8), in addition to the disposition to theoretical knowledge about the world around us, there are two practical dispositions to knowledge which he calls *technē* and *phronēsis*. To put it very briefly, *technē* is the practical disposition to knowledge related to the material and physical world, whereas *phronēsis* is the practical disposition oriented to the social world. *Technē* is needed to produce material goods, to cultivate land, to construct houses, canals or ships, etc. (Aristotle 2011, 1094a5–10). The term manifests itself in the modern concepts of technical knowledge and technology. Technical information is instrumental in that its aims are external to knowledge for its own sake (Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2018).

Practical knowledge is needed not only in material work but also in social life. This kind of practical knowledge is called *phronēsis*. It is reasoning about what is wise, right and proper to do in terms of living a ‘good life’ (Aristotle 2011, 1140b1–6). *Phronēsis* is often translated as practical wisdom. *Phronēsis* is based on the disposition to seek to know how to live a meaningful, happy and worthy life with other humans. This flourishing and worthwhile life is called *eudaimonia* in Ancient Greece philosophy. When people act and live according to *phronēsis*, are informed and motivated by it, and aspire for a ‘good life’ in this broader sense of the phrase (*eudaimonia*), they are carrying out *praxis*. In other words, *praxis* is human actions and activities informed by *phronēsis*. This kind of human action is about how human beings can live a virtuous way of life amidst the everyday choices and dilemmas that we invariably face (Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2018).

However, not all human actions and activities in the social world can be regarded as *praxis*. According to the above definition, *praxis* is particular kinds of human action, informed by all that humans know and based on their rational thinking. *Praxis* is the kind of action humans are engaged in when they think about, in the broadest sense, what consequences their actions might have in both the social and material world. In other words, ‘*Praxis* is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest

view they can of what it is *best* to do, they *act*' (Kemmis and Smith 2008, 4). The goals of action and tools to achieve *praxis* cannot be separated: *praxis* is therefore of value in itself. We may say that *praxis* is the underlying aim of all education, and all other forms of reason are subordinate to *praxis*. From this perspective, the ultimate aim of education is actually nothing less than *praxis*; it is to provide people with an understanding about how to live a good life with one another, outlining their place in the universe and the cosmos (Kemmis and Smith 2008; Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2018).

In our view, the fundamental meaning of the concept of autonomy is based on the kind of disposition we call *praxis orientation*, i.e. autonomous action in education involving deliberative action oriented to a notion of the 'good' of the person who is educated, and the 'good' of the society. A *praxis orientation* promotes generalised interests in society, ideally within and for the whole of humankind and for life on this planet. However, the concept of autonomy is frequently employed in education in a way that suggests a narrower interpretation. For instance, the purpose of education has been redefined in ways that suggest its purpose is to produce, on the one hand, productive citizens and, on the other, active consumers, so that the economy can flourish and grow. In this interpretation, autonomy in education is about promoting the functioning of the free market; so that people, businesses and other actors learn to act autonomously to compete in the market. This narrowed conception of education is manifested in a notion of the good for the enterprising individual or school and the promotion of individual and collective interests of a limited group (e.g. an enterprise or a specific school) within the demands of the free market. This has narrowed the concept of autonomy to what we call a *market orientation*. This orientation to autonomy arises from the embrace of neoliberalism by western democracies and in particular, Anglophone nations. It is part of a 'global policy convergence in schooling' (Lingard 2010, 136) that has led to the 'economisation of schooling policy', a narrowed conception of the purposes of education 'as the production of a certain quantity and quality of human capital', and 'new accountability relations based on performance data ... between departments of education and schools' (Lingard, Thompson, and Sellar 2016, 2). The *professional orientation*, which is still manifest in some education systems despite the colonisation of the *market orientation*, promotes the good for the professional community (e.g. principals' or teachers' associations/unions). In this case, the concept of autonomy is used only to promote the collective interests of a limited professional community, and this view is typically represented by teachers' unions.

To sum up, a *praxis orientation to autonomy* refers to a disposition to social action which prioritises the common good for all members of society, and thus differs from both a *professional orientation* and a *market orientation*, both of which advocate the exclusive benefits of limited groups. This also means that autonomy in the *praxis* sense is not individualism or selfishness, but quite the opposite; it aims at generalisable human interests. The three orientations are defined and summarised in Table 1 below.

We have chosen to present the emerging traditions and discourses of autonomy evident in the sites before we define the conditions in the sites. This provides the reader with organisational clarity, but we note that theorisation emerged from the 'messiness' of the analysis phase conducted by the three authors. Thus, in the preceding table, we characterise three main orientations to autonomy in education we see arising through our interrogation of the three sites.¹ These orientations draw on theories of discourse

Table 1. Traditions and discourses of autonomy.

	Autonomy		
	Market orientation	Professional orientation	Praxis orientation
1. Whose good is foregrounded?	– the good for the enterprising individual or school	– the good for the professional community (e.g. principals’ or teachers’ associations)	– the good for society and humankind
2. What kind of will-formation is emphasised?	– personal, individual will-formation or social will formation within a school in the free market	– social will-formation within a limited professional community	– collective will-formation, ideally within and for humankind
3. Whose interests are privileged?	– promotion of individual interests and collective interests of a limited group (e.g. a specific school) within the demands of the free market	– promotion of collective interests of a limited professional community	– promotion of generalised interests
4. Whose interests are marginalised?	– students and families from a range of equity background (refugees, low economic status, Indigenous)	– parents, families, communities – potentially some individual teachers and schools within the professional body	– ideally: no one – practically speaking: requires a critical disposition that interrogates questions of who is the general ‘all’ that this praxis orientation claims to represent
5. Which traditions and discourses are represented?	Liberalism, neoliberalism, new public management	Corporatism/ corporativism in terms of social democracy	Critical theories, folk enlightenment

ethics and communicative action (Habermas 1984a, 1984b) to frame the questions in the left column of the table. The first three questions: *Whose good is foregrounded? What kind of will-formation is emphasised? Whose interests are privileged?* illustrate a continuum ranging from individual will formation and interests to collective will formation in communities of different sizes and generalisable interests. The fourth question, *Whose interests are marginalised?* makes it possible to perceive the categories through a contra-factual method by asking which groups are excluded from individual or collective will formations. Question Five in the above table, *Which traditions and discourses are represented?* gestures more broadly to some of the intellectual traditions beyond these differing interpretations of autonomy.

We conclude the first section with the contention that the concept of *autonomy as praxis* and the resultant concept of a *praxis* orientation may provide important theoretical and practical alternative resources to *market* and *professional orientations* in contemporary times. We contend that this definition of *praxis orientation* offers aspirational and conceptual tools to empirically analyse principals’ views on school leadership and autonomy in relation to educational authorities, parents and teachers. A *praxis orientation*

towards education opens up a very different orientation from the two other kinds of interpretations of autonomy noted above that frequently manifest in contemporary education systems, i.e. *professional* and *market orientations*.

3. Empirical analysis: contested notions of autonomy

In order to make adequate sense of the phenomenon of autonomy in education we drew on various forms of evidence from the practice field. Hence, our methodological design combined aspects of literature review and theoretical–conceptual analysis with a comparative case study approach. Various forms of evidence drawn from the practice field included interviews with case study participants (see details below) and an analysis of articles (N=86) in the *Journal of Educational Policy* which canvassed autonomy. Given word limitations, in this article we draw on data from the case studies.

In terms of the comparative case studies, systematic data collection was carried out in the form of interviews of school principals in Finland, Australia and Jamaica. These interviews were unstructured and focused broadly on the sets of conditions that prefigured and influenced principals' experiences and practices of autonomy as school leaders and thus the experience of their schools as autonomous institutions. The three authors have a history of collaborating on cross-national empirical projects and as such, the three countries were selected both because of ease of access based on the current working locations of the researchers and in particular, because the study offered a unique opportunity to bring together the experiences of school principals from three distinctively different historical, ethnic and economically different contexts. As such, the study had the potential to highlight very different sets of prefiguring conditions shaping understandings and realisations of autonomy and autonomous decision-making practices in our respective nations.

The case studies addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How is autonomy understood/interpreted by principals in Australia, Finland and Jamaica?
- (2) What are the site based conditions which enable and/or constrain principals' autonomous decision making practices in Australia, Finland and Jamaica?

In Finland, two interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with principal *Urho*,² the principal of a middle-sized suburban school in a city of 1,40,000 inhabitants. In Victoria, Australia, three interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with principal *Lauren*, the principal of a small, outer metropolitan, ethnically diverse primary school. In Jamaica, four 'critical conversations' of approximately 45 min each were conducted with principal *Jacqueline*, the principal of denominational, co-educational high school in rural Jamaica. These interviews were called critical conversations as they tended to focus on Jacqueline's reflections on critical incidents at her school given that she was a newly appointed principal. The interview approaches used in each case were distinct given that in each case they were part of other empirical projects in our respective nations. At different moments in presenting the case the voices of the participants are deliberately limited to maintain the focus on issues related to autonomy and reduce the appearance of interesting but less directly pertinent data.

The data was analysed using Nicolini's (2012) technique of *zooming in* and *zooming out*. We recognise autonomous decision making as a social practice conducted in the nexus of interactions among people, in contexts with histories. Further, we recognise that while sites contain within them pre-existing linguistic, material and social arrangements, people bring new practices to sites through their connectivity to other sites. Thus, the global and the local are always existing in intersubjectivity. *Zooming in* and *zooming out* provided us with the ability to maintain the intersubjective relationship between the global and the local, even while we located our subjectivities as researchers in an analytic moment that focussed on the particular and rationalised our individual and collective interpretation of the data.

In the *zooming in* phase the three researchers, met over a period of three weeks in Finland to discuss the data and gain an in-depth level of understanding for each context. We interrogated micro episodes in an attempt to apprehend what was happening in each context. At this stage we identified critical episodes in the data. In particular, we focussed on the particularities of each site, examining the internal historical antecedents of autonomy and the ways in which autonomy is interpreted in context by the individual principal. In the *zooming out* phase we re-examined the data. Firstly, we discussed the sets of national imperatives (economic and globalised forces) that were impacting upon the form and nature of education and schooling within the sites and the ways in which these policies were prefiguring practices, experiences and understandings of autonomy. Secondly, we interrogated our own experiences as teachers, educators, researchers and administrators within our particular national contexts and compared our experiences and critical moments to those being experienced by the studies' participants. These reflections juxtaposed against the empirical data served to influence our arrival at the three orientations of autonomy. In the next section, we contextualise each case and illustrate how autonomy was understood and enacted across the individual sites. We employ the questions on the left-hand side of Table 1 as thematic signposts for our findings.

3.1. Principals' autonomous decision-making practices: Victoria, Australia

As a settler nation with strong ties to Britain and the USA, Australia has had a history of policy-borrowing from Anglo-American nations. As a federated nation, state governments in Australia are responsible for the funding and administration of government school systems within their jurisdiction. Before federation, Australia consisted of a number of different British colonies which came together as one nation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, each state has a differing set of histories and traditions in regard to education systems and this is reflected in the differential ways in which moves towards autonomy have been adopted and inflected within their public education systems. This is not to dismiss the importance of the federal government and their increasing influence in education through the introduction of a national curriculum, national literacy and numeracy testing and partial funding for non-government schools. Rather, we are foregrounding the necessity of examining a specific state education system as a case study, given the very different historical traditions and contexts which shape government education provision in the Australian context. Hence this case study focuses on autonomous decision-making practices of principals in Victoria, Australia.

Historically, Victoria is an important case study, for in the late 1980s it was the first public education system in Australia which adopted what was then a radical self-managing system of school governance. This was as a result of the election of a conservative state government who emulated neoliberal policies borrowed from Maggie Thatcher's England. In particular, the government introduced principles of competition and business management in the government system; embarked on a series of school closures under the guise of 'efficiencies'; shut teacher unions out of any negotiations; and directly negotiated with school principals to increase their power.

As a result of this early adoption, and in contrast to all other Australian state education systems which adopted varying policies of school autonomy much later than Victoria, education policies in the state of Victoria over the past three decades have been powerfully influenced by *discourses and traditions of neoliberalism*, such as the creation of a quasi-market in compulsory education and a policy of parental choice of schools. In turn, such initiatives have led to an increasingly stratified school system. The costs of this stratification are borne not only by the most vulnerable students, whose parents and communities lack power, influence and resources in the education marketplace, but also 'in terms of stagnating achievement levels, widening resource inequities and inflated costs' (Connors and McMorro 2015, 53). Hence, the autonomous decision-making practices of 'Lauren',³ the school principal, were prefigured by state and federal government policies, funding arrangements and historical circumstances peculiar to the Victorian education system which shaped the principal's habitus in ways that suggested a strong *market orientation*, underpinned by an *instrumentalist, means-end rationality*. Nonetheless, there were also glimpses of a *praxis orientation*.

'Leafy Hill Primary School' is located in the capital city of Victoria, Melbourne, in an outer suburb with high socio-economic disadvantage. Although previously a highly Anglo monocultural population with a history of economic precarity, recently the area has been home to a number of refugee families attracted to its cheaper housing. Hence the school has a mix of Anglo Australian families, some with a history of generational unemployment, combined with a refugee community which has a proud oral and religious tradition, but low rates of literacy and formal education. Lauren was a highly experienced educator from an Anglo Australian, working-class background, who had taught in similar schools for over 20 years and had been a principal at Leafy Hills Primary School for a considerable period of time.

The main focus of Lauren's autonomous decision-making practices was how to make her small government school viable in a highly competitive education market in which public and private schools competed fiercely for enrolments. Until recently, the student numbers at Leafy Hill Primary School had plummeted to a point that threatened school closure. However, in the past several years, the numbers had slowly increased to a point where the school was considered viable. The survival of the school was due to key changes to teaching, learning and professional learning practices which catered more responsively to an ethnically diverse student demographic suffering from high levels of poverty, homelessness and family violence. It is in this sense that Lauren's orientation towards autonomy as praxis, mixed with a clear *market orientation*, was most clearly revealed.

In the extract below, Lauren discusses her clear *telos* or aim in regard to growing school numbers, through an emphasis on the positives that being a small school entailed for students and families. She noted that

We have a lot of schools in our area and so ... there has to be some points of difference ... And so we had to look at what the size could allow us to do, that the other schools could not do. And part of that was to recognise firstly the people that chose to come here, and what education they were getting and what relationships their parents and families were getting by being at the school and choosing.

The reiteration of phrases such as ‘points of difference ... people that chose to come here ... choosing’ suggests the neoliberal *market orientation* towards autonomy which prefigures and shapes the entrepreneurial habitus (language, activities and modes of relating to agents within and without the schooling field) of public school principals in Victoria. Principals are located as business-oriented entrepreneurs, competing in an environment oriented to the success of the enterprising individual leader and school. Surviving and thriving is the primary telos of individual principals and schools. In choosing Leafy Hills (rather than another school in the district), Lauren’s language foregrounds an intersubjective space in which students, parents and educators encounter one another as part of a market-oriented contract between a consumer (the family and potential students) and the producer of the product (the small, community and family-friendly school).

In regard to enhancements to teaching and learning practices, Lauren had undertaken a number of initiatives including: the appointment of an English as an Additional Language (EAL) coach to work with teachers to enhance their knowledge and strategies; forming strong school partnerships with key organisations outside the public education system such as the local council and a charity which worked specifically with refugee families; and employing teaching staff attuned to the school’s demographic. Lauren had astutely used the school budget to maintain small class sizes, the latter of which were a key part of the school’s market-oriented ‘point of difference’. This was a highly risky strategy that pitted her judgement against the school’s Departmental Regional Liaison Officer. As Lauren explained:

I knew that I needed small numbers in the school for the cohort of kids that I had ... So there was an awful lot of grappling as to ... and I guess it comes down a little bit to your own self-efficacy, and whether you believe that you’ve thought through the decision clearly.

In response to the question, *what kind of will formation is emphasised?* highly individualising language such as ‘your own self-efficacy, and whether you believe ...’ suggests Lauren’s habitus has been strongly shaped by an orientation towards personal, individual will formation within the quasi education market of Victoria. However, the language Lauren employed also suggests that principals’ practices of autonomy cannot be reduced to autonomy within the ideal type of market formation, i.e. as a set of business transactions between consumer/client/provider which the discourse of school leader as entrepreneur prefigures. Rather, in terms of the question, *whose interests are privileged?* Lauren’s response suggests a mixture of both the market and *praxis orientation*. For instance, she grapples between her commitment to an ethic of care for students (‘I knew that I needed small numbers in the school *for the cohort of kids that I had*’); her ethical beliefs about education for this cohort of children; and the demands of the educational system (‘But the Department representative was very much, really strongly said five ... (classes) ... was the number that we should have’). Crucially, however, her leadership practices *foregrounded the interests* of the low SES and refugees students in her

school, in contrast to principals' actions in some other schools in which these cohorts of students' interests are *marginalised* (Keddie 2016).

In regard to *whose good is foregrounded?* Lauren's responses drew attention to how her leadership practices were shaped by the specificity of *this* particular school site (its location as a small school nestled amongst competing larger schools); *this* particular school community (high levels of entrenched poverty and intergenerational unemployment, a high refugee population); and *these* particular students (as opposed to other school sites, communities and students). The ethic of care she demonstrates towards the students, teachers and the school community in standing up to the Departmental representative's 'really strong ...' advice hint at the broader educative function of autonomy. It suggests a *praxis orientation* in which principals may operate not only as enterprising individuals maximising their own good but also as 'moral and professional agents with the collective moral and professional agency, autonomy and responsibility to practise their profession ...' (Kemmis et al. 2014, 8). However, whether they can do so in ways that move beyond a *market orientation* to autonomy, is debatable.

3.2. Principals' autonomous decision-making practices: Finland

The Australian educational practices and policies noted above have been influenced by their political and cultural heritage from Anglo-American nations, especially Britain. In contrast, the Finnish culture of education can be understood within an historical continuum dating back to European traditions of Enlightenment and social and political developments in Scandinavia. In the Nordic countries, the European tradition of 'Bildung' strongly influences educational practices, coupled with traditions of the Scandinavian welfare state, which are based on the values of democracy, equity and solidarity (Ax and Ponte 2008; Rönnerman, Furu, and Salo 2008).

In Finnish society, the professional autonomy of teachers is highly recognised and respected. Entrance into teacher education is extremely competitive and highly sought-after. A master's degree has been a requirement in primary and secondary school teacher education since 1979. The Education Trade Union (OAJ) in Finland has been a strong advocate for the high professional autonomy of teachers. The organisation includes practically all Finnish educators, ranging from early childhood to university and polytechnics. School principals are also members OAJ is a substantial stakeholder in education and has a strong influence in maintaining a priority on the professional autonomy and voice of teachers in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and policy-making.

Another important and distinctive feature in Finland which Jamaica shares and which stands in contrast to Australia is that education is overwhelmingly concentrated in the public sector. Since the 1960s, the national strategy has been to invest in general basic education in order to ensure equity of educational opportunities for all regardless of geographical location or economic resources. In essence, children start school in their nearest government school and there is no competition for student enrolments. In response to the question *Which traditions and discourses are privileged?* we would note that discourses around folk enlightenment and Nordic welfare state traditions are privileged. Hence, a *market orientation* towards autonomy in Finnish education is not a driving force. Rather than being concerned about their competitiveness in a quasi-

market, schools are allocated direct funding by the municipalities. As the principal *Urho* notes, 'Our municipality grants us a certain amount and we have to keep the school running with it'.

However, there are some mechanisms that indicate ideas from New Public Management may be being adopted in Finnish educational administration, albeit at a low level. In discussing the cleaning of schools, *Urho* makes a direct comparison to the United Kingdom:

So we pay rent to the property managers and they in turn put out competitive bids for the rights to do maintenance, cleaning and the like at our school. [...] For a comparison, I've heard that in Great Britain, principals can have more of a say in these technical matters, like who does the cleaning at a school and how often is the school cleaned.

In Finland, as a manifestation of the high professional autonomy of teachers there is no inspection system, public accountability mechanisms or any other kinds of hierarchical control. Teachers and principals carry out their work relatively unimpeded. *Urho* regards this as one of the key aspects of teachers' work. He observes:

The teachers do have the pedagogical freedom to do their job their way as long as they fulfil the general requirements of the administration and the national core curriculum.

Teacher autonomy provides an important background for the Finnish case. Whereas the Australian Principal *Lauren* was concerned about student enrolment, *Urho*'s main concern was the implementation of a new national curriculum in his school. The national core curriculum in Finland provides the basis for local curricula in the municipalities and schools. The education providers, i.e. the municipality authorities draw up their own curricula within the framework of the core curriculum and implement it. The last step of the implementation process is at the school level and the person who is responsible for implementation is the school principal.

The new national core curriculum was a clear shift from subject-based, or discipline-based pedagogy to a holistic phenomenon-based or problem-based learning. The change towards a more holistic approach was seen by the principal as an attractive opportunity for developing educational practices. He reflected:

Now the new national curriculum will again challenge every teacher to think about their profession in new ways. [...] this upcoming new version, it challenges teachers to study phenomena together with their students. The curriculum doesn't necessarily outline exact must-be-taught details for certain school subjects anymore. It gives teachers more freedom to make their own pedagogical choices.

In relation to the question *What kind of will-formation is emphasised?* *Urho*'s response suggests an emphasis on the educational professionals who will be free to 'make their own pedagogical choices'. This implies a strong *professional orientation* towards autonomy. However, in the latter phases of implementation, the principal notes that others are also involved:

The national core curriculum clearly states that both students and parents should be encouraged to take part in keeping a school running. They should have a say in both the planning and implementation of school business. For example, our school has had a parents' council for many years now. It holds regular meetings that always have a representative of the school staff present.

In response to the questions, *Whose good is foregrounded? and Whose interests are privileged?* we see in the above quotation, an orientation to generalisable interests; that is, the good for the students is foregrounded, but also parents' voices are taken into account. Importantly, however, the good for teachers in terms of maintaining their professional and pedagogical freedom has been regarded as an important value in Finland, in contrast to Australia. Therefore, in summary, it can be said that in Finland we may distinguish features typical of both the *professional* and *praxis orientation*. The emphasis on *market orientation* remains low, with the New Public Management doctrine applied to school property management and technical maintenance rather than educational practice.

3.3. Principals' autonomous decision-making practices: Jamaica

Like Australia, Jamaica is a member of the Commonwealth; but unlike Finland, and Australia, autonomous decision making is not a strong discursive feature of Jamaica's educational landscape. This silence can be attributed to its experience as a former British colony with a traumatic history of enslavement. This experience of colonialism has significantly prefigured the nature, form, and purpose of education in Jamaica, where the expansion of public education was seen as fitting the citizen for society. In terms of organisation and management, though appearing to be decentralised, educational organisation is 'hierarchical, highly centralised and bureaucratic' (Davis 2004, 72). This is the essence of its postcolonial reality and is contextualised by: (1) a strong overseer tradition, including master-slave narratives which position teachers and school leaders in positions of dependency and inferiority in relation to officials from the Ministry of Education (Bristol 2012); and (2) strong traditions of policy borrowing, staged competitive examinations and recognised practices of educational stratification and streaming. As such, education reform is often a struggle between adherence to authority and aspirations for autonomous decision making in education as a part of the post-colonial agenda.

Concerned with student performance and the need for increased levels of educational accountability and collaboration (including the introduction of School Boards at every level of the education system) the government of Jamaica has made significant investments in leadership development. Building upon the recommendations of the National Task Force on Educational Reform in Jamaica, the government instituted the National College for Educational Leadership (NCEL) which was tasked with the 'responsibility to develop excellent leadership in the island's public schools and supporting institutions' (Smith 2015, 6).

At *Country View High School*, the principal, Jacqueline, a first appointment principal, pursued an agenda of fostering dispositions of autonomy in the teaching practices of staff. As such, with regard to the question: *Whose good is foregrounded?* it was Jacqueline's view that, 'school is about teaching and learning ... It is always about what is best for the children'. Thus, the beneficiaries of all educational decisions were firmly located in the needs of the learners themselves. This emphasised the need for a *kind of will-formation* where teachers and learners collectively and continuously sought to take personal ownership for making the best decisions in the interest of the individual and community need.

In her responses sJacqueline tended to be very concerned with notions of personal ownership, continually repeating that this was 'my responsibility.' She used similar

language when referencing individual teachers whom she constructed as deficient when it came to fulfilling ‘their responsibilities.’ In relation to *Whose interests are privileged?* Jacqueline drew strongly on market discourses in terms of requirements around school quality and school choice. However, her notion of responsibility was also tempered by a *professional orientation* towards autonomy, for example, when she described her impatience with teachers who failed to live up to their ‘professional responsibility to [their] students’.

On the question of *Whose interests are marginalised?* Jacqueline’s responses suggested a *praxis orientation*, for example, she discussed the importance of championing social justice issues, including seeking to ensure that poorer students gained access to meals and regular transportation to school. The question of whose interests are marginalised has a reciprocal relationship with *what kind of rationality* was emphasised. Jacqueline’s remarks highlight frequent tensions between market and more praxis-oriented forms of autonomy. She commented:

The Ministry of Education has specific requirements for [the] submission of reports and sometimes you think like they are ... more focused on just checking boxes and making sure that we have all these reports but not necessarily focussing on how these reports impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. (Jacqueline)

Here we see conflict between the authoritative positioning of the Ministry of Education and the need for freedom and responsibility (trust) to engage in autonomous decision making at the level of the site to ensure that actions are prudent and relevant to the needs of community.

For Jacqueline, the question of *What is the nature of communication?* contained an inherent contradiction. On the one hand her conversation demonstrated a clear aspiration towards communicative action through, for example, her attempts to involve teachers in decision making via shared leadership practices. On the other hand, her actions suggested a more strategic form of communication. We see these contradictions playing out in an episode where Jacqueline attempted to encourage the development of a critical learning community amongst the teachers. by strongly encouraging each teacher to take a turn at leading or facilitating the weekly professional development session. strongly encouraging each teacher to take a turn at leading or facilitating the weekly professional development session. Her intentions towards communicative action are clear. However, the language of regulation and the perception of an absence of trust are also very strong in her description and may serve to undermine her aspirations for a more *praxis orientation* towards teachers’ autonomy.

I felt that I needed to give her ... [the teacher] ... the opportunity to share, so that other persons would see somebody else taking that role, rather than just myself ... I was curious to see what she was going to share, ... I wanted to know whether ... what she was going to share, was ... in keeping with what we expected, so I filtered but I still allowed her to do the presentation ... I would feel the need at least still to see, until I got to the point where I was confident that what they wanted to do would take us in the direction in which we wanted to go, as a school.

Jacqueline’s need to foster the autonomous practices of her teachers arises out of a deep-rooted concern for the welfare and development of the teachers. However, given an unconscious rehearsal of surveillance, which echo the master-slave narratives of

Jamaica's colonial history noted in the opening of this section, combined with a lack of experience as a new principal, her actions actually set in motion relationships with teachers where she is constructed as authoritarian, 'distant and unapproachable' (Jacqueline's self-reflection). These surveillance practices work to return her actions towards a more market orientation of autonomy.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The cases highlighted in this study are distinctive in terms of the historical and geopolitical arrangements within each country. They reveal differing intentions for education in each site in terms of their varied histories and current manifestations. In Finland, education is rooted in nineteenth century notions of folk enlightenment and a profound democratising impulse; in Jamaica the expansion of public education originated in the need to '*fit*' the individuals society, while in Victoria, Australia we see public education being shaped by notions of education as a business imperative. These differing histories prefigure the orientations of autonomous decision making by principals in the sites. Against the backdrop of a shrinking global world; the distinctive nature of the sites provides for a rich and unique comparative lens, in the face of assumptions that principals' practices of autonomous decision making can be universally understood.

Different cultural and historical traditions, as well as current trends in educational administration are reflected in the principals' varied understandings of autonomy. In Finland, the concept of autonomy is often understood in terms of the professionalism of teachers, both through a corporative orientation such as that advocated by the national trade union of teachers, and at more general level as a prerequisite of teacher professionalism. These understandings of autonomy emerge in the interview with Urho. In the Victorian, Australia site, the concept of principal autonomy is strongly influenced by neoliberal discourses of the market, albeit clearly tempered by a *praxis orientation* in terms of care for the students. In Lauren's discourse, the concepts of school or teacher autonomy refer to players within a quasi-market. In Jamaica, a *market orientation* towards autonomy operates as the framing for educational organisation; but we see movements towards a *professional* and *praxis orientation* through Jacqueline's engagements with her staff and students and through her recognition of quality education as an imperative in advancing social justice goals.

Significantly, the outcome of our investigation suggests that interpretations of autonomy in education are prefigured by the peculiarities of the historical trajectories and ideological traditions enmeshed in diverse sites. These prefiguring arrangements in turn influence varying understandings and realisations of autonomous decision-making practices across local and national sites. Furthermore, when it comes to principals' decision-making, even in the expression of high/low levels of autonomy, there are contradictory and contested practices. Crucially, our argument, as exemplified by the cases is that the better teachers themselves understand and agree about the basic aims or values of education, the more enabling their educational practices will be. If a culture of teacher autonomy is not encouraged principals will have to inspect, control and survey practitioners in order to preserve aspirations of educational quality. On the other hand, if teachers are nurtured as autonomous agents the principal's role

will evolve into one of nurturing, facilitating and enabling equality educational outcomes, promoting an agenda of quality and inclusive education for all.

Autonomous decision-making of principals has been lauded as important to improving school outcomes and enhancing opportunities to experience education as a measure of social equity. Our comparative study, rooted in a holistic and abductive philosophical-empirical approach highlights the need for a re-consideration of the question of autonomy; that is, autonomy in whose interests? For what end? For what purpose? These questions have significant implications for how education is manifested at the local, national and international level; as notions of autonomy (and its team-mates, accountability and authority) are imported and exported across contexts with varying impacts on educational outcomes in sites with disparate historical traditions. Moreover, autonomy as a characteristic of educational quality is seen to operate differently in varied educational contexts; evident in different ways along the continuum between market, professional and praxis-oriented forms of autonomy.

Our key point is that current taken-for-granted understandings of educational autonomy mask wider and deeper interpretations of the concept that either disguises or makes autonomy recognisable. Therefore in this paper; first through our conceptualisation of different manifestations of autonomy and second, through the illustration of three different practices/sense making of autonomy; we have attempted to provide a set of alternative thinking tools that expand notions and understandings of autonomy in education beyond current hegemonic discourses of the market. In so doing, we aim to: reclaim autonomy in education in neoliberal times employing alternative perspectives that draw on the philosophical and etymological origins of the word; and promote a concept of autonomy that acknowledges the notion of educational praxis. In so doing, our hope is to reconnect educators' practices of autonomy with 'individual and collective praxis as a way of expressing the double purpose of education: to help people live well in a world worth living in' (Kemmis et al. 2014, 25).

Notes

1. It is important to note that each of these orientations are ideal types.
2. All names of principals, schools and any other potentially identifying details have been changed.
3. Pseudonyms are employed for all schools and principals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was funded by two successive Cygnaeus Scholarly Grants, awarded to Jane Wilkinson and Laurette Bristol in 2016 and 2017, by the Finnish Institute for Educational Research of University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Notes on contributors

Hannu L. T. Heikkinen is a Professor of Education in the Finnish Institute for Educational Research in University of Jyväskylä and an Adjunct Professor in two Australian universities (Charles Sturt University and Griffith University) and three Finnish universities (University of Tampere, University of Jyväskylä and Åbo Akademi University).

Jane Wilkinson is Professor in Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education at Monash University, Associate Dean Graduate Research and an adjunct in the School of Education at Charles Sturt University.

Laurette Bristol was at the time of writing this manuscript the President of the Catholic College of Mandeville, Jamaica, and has since been working as a Program Manager, Human Resource Development at The Secretariat for the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

ORCID

Hannu L. T. Heikkinen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2547-9372>

Jane Wilkinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0727-0025>

Laurette Bristol  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9917-1392>

References

- Aristotle. 2011. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by R. C. Bartlett and S. D. Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published ca. 350 BCE).
- Ax, J., and P. Ponte, eds. 2008. *Critiquing Praxis: Conceptual and Empirical Trends in the Teaching Profession (Pedagogy, Education and Praxis)*. Vol. 2. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Bristol, L. 2012. *Plantation Pedagogy: A Postcolonial and Global Perspective*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Christman, J. 2018. "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* (Spring 2018 Edition), edited by E. N. Zalta. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/autonomy-moral/>.
- Connors, L., and J. McMorrow. 2015. *Imperatives in Schools Funding: Equity, Sustainability and Achievement (Australian Education Review No. 60)*. Victoria: ACER Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. 1990. "Teacher Professionalism: Why and How?" In *Schools as Collaborative Culture: Creating the Future Now (School Development and the Management of Change Series No. 3)*, edited by A. Lieberman, 25–50. New York: Falmer Press.
- Davis, R. 2004. *Task Force on Educational Reform: Jamaica: A Transformed Education System* (Task Force on Educational Reform Final Report). <https://jis.gov.jm/estp/docs/Reports/JA%20Education%20Reform%20TaskForce%202004.pdf>.
- De Grauwe, A. 2005. "School-Based Management (SBM): Does it Improve Quality?" Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative.
- Habermas, J. 1984a. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by T. McCarthy. London: Heinemann.
- Habermas, J. 1984b. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Translated by T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hangartner, J., and C. J. Svaton. 2013. "From Autonomy to Quality Management: NPM Impacts on School Governance in Switzerland." *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 45 (4): 354–369. doi:10.1080/00220620.2013.822352.
- Hargreaves, A. 2000. "Four Ages of Professionalism and Professional Learning." *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 6 (2): 151–182. doi:10.1080/713698714.
- Ikeda, M. 2011. "School Autonomy and Accountability: Are They Related to Student Performance?" *PISA in Focus* 2011/9 (October). Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/48910490.pdf>.

- Kant, I. 2013. *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'* Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/enlightenment.htm>.
- Keddie, A. 2016. "School Autonomy as 'the Way of the Future': Issues of Equity, Public Purpose and Moral Leadership." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 44 (5): 713–727. doi:10.1177/1741143214559231.
- Kemmis, S., and T. J. Smith. 2008. "Praxis and Praxis Development: About This Book." In *Enabling Praxis: Challenges for Education (Pedagogy, Education and Praxis No. 1)*, edited by S. Kemmis and T. Smith, 3–13. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Kemmis, S., J. Wilkinson, C. Edwards-Groves, I. Hardy, P. Grootenboer, and L. Bristol, eds. 2014. *Changing Practices, Changing Education*. Singapore: Springer.
- Konings, P. 2006. "Assessing the Role of Autonomous Teachers' Trade Unions in Anglophone Cameroon, 1959–1972." *The Journal of African History* 47 (3): 415–436. doi:10.1017/S0021853706001782.
- Lingard, B. 2010. "Policy Borrowing, Policy Learning: Testing Times in Australian Schooling." *Critical Studies in Education* 51 (2): 129–147. doi:10.1080/17508481003731026.
- Lingard, B., G. Thompson, and S. Sellar. 2016. "National Testing from an Australian Perspective." In *National Testing in Schools: An Australian Assessment*, edited by B. Lingard, G. Thompson, and S. Sellar, 1–17. New York: Routledge.
- Mahon, K., H. L. T. Heikkinen, and R. Huttunen. 2018. "Critical Educational Praxis in University Eco-Systems: Enablers and Constraints." *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27 (3): 463–480. doi:10.1080/14681366.2018.1522663.
- McPeck, J. E., and J. T. Sanders. 1974. "Some Reflections on Education as a Profession." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de la Pensée Éducative* 8 (2): 55–66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23768758?seq=1>.
- Nicolini, D. 2012. *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rönnerman, K., E. M. Furu, and P. Salo, eds. 2008. *Nurturing Praxis: Action Research in Partnerships Between School and University in a Nordic Light (Pedagogy, Education and Praxis No. 3)*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Smith, M. D. 2015. "Effective Principals' Training Programme Report [Cohorts 1–8]." Ministry of Education, National College for Educational Leadership. Accessed April 20, 2020. https://ncl.gov.jm/sites/default/files/eptp_report_c1-8_mar_15.pdf.
- Stevenson, H. 2003. "On the Shopfloor: Exploring the Impact of Teacher Trade Unions on School-Based Industrial Relations." *School Leadership and Management* 23 (3): 341–356. doi:10.1080/1363243032000112829.
- Whitty, G. 2000. "Teacher Professionalism in New Times." *Journal of In-Service Education* 26 (2): 281–295. doi:10.1080/13674580000200121.