

# School leadership for equity and learning and the question of school autonomy

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## Abstract

The article draws from the work conducted in the context of the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL). In particular, it is based on an in-depth review of school leadership policies in 21 European countries and the discourse that is taking place in EPNoSLs webinars, national workshops and peer learning activities organised in several EU countries with the participation of a variety of school leadership stakeholders (including policy makers at European, national, and local levels, school leaders, teachers and other professionals, academics, researchers, parents and students). EPNoSL is a network of 42 European institutions that aims at improving policy on, and practice in, school leadership in Europe. The article discusses the question of school autonomy in the context of school leadership policy development in Europe. School autonomy is considered as a critical precondition for the development of comprehensive school leadership policies. Based on the comprehensive framework of school leadership policy development that has been developed in the context of this project, the article undertakes two main tasks. Firstly, it attempts to show that instead of searching for universal solutions on the question of school autonomy, it is important to reflect on context-specific policies on autonomy that aim at the attainment of concrete learning and equity goals. Secondly, it specifies seven general directions for policies on school autonomy that are adaptive to the divergent experiences of European education systems.

*Keywords:* school leadership, school autonomy

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## Introduction

This article is based on the work conducted in the context of the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL). Based on the comprehensive framework on school leadership policy development that has been established in the context of this project, the article presents some critical challenges faced by policies on school autonomy across Europe. These challenges are articulated from the perspective of school leadership related policies in Europe which have been thoroughly discussed and reviewed by EPNoSL in the past two years. Our policy suggestions on school autonomy stem from this policy review and from an equally comprehensive secondary review of the school leadership literature that deals with the question of autonomy.

How school leadership is understood shapes the development and implementation of school leadership policies as well as how school players, from school boards and principals to teachers, parents and students will engage in it. This article proposes that school leadership should be approached as a multi-faceted process by strategically using the unique skills and knowledge of teachers, pupils, and parents, toward achieving common educational goals (Kollias, 2013). It is more about relationships rather than people or processes. From this perspective, within the framework of educational goals, leadership is present at all levels of an organisation, directed at serving the most important stakeholders, through inspiring others in the organisation to take part in the management process (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Mulford & Edmunds, 2009). Likewise, management in leadership involves making the best use of human, material and financial resources available. School leadership, therefore, conveys dynamism and pro-activity. It is not restricted to principals or school heads but also includes other leaders in education, such as members of a formal leadership team and other persons who contribute towards the vision of the school, even including student leadership.

School autonomy is a critical precondition for the development of comprehensive school leadership policies (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; OECD, 2008). School leadership practices are limited or enabled both by the degree to which autonomy is granted to schools and by the forms that this autonomy might take in different educational contexts. This article understands school autonomy as a term used to indicate that schools and school-level actors have been given some room for manoeuvre to take their own decisions in managing schools and dealing with everyday teaching and learning challenges, and that constraints from the outside - and inside - are reduced to the necessary and legitimate frames, values and norms (Moos,

2013). In this context, school autonomy is seen as a critical policy area not only for shaping the learning environment at the school level but also for the attainment of equity goals. Decreasing educational inequities within and amongst schools requires a vast array of initiatives that redress the entire range of discriminatory and exclusionary practices that are produced and re-produced within the school environment.

The article pursues this line of argument in the two following sections. The first section takes issue with the concept of school leadership. It attempts, specifically, to establish a connection between school leadership practices and the attainment of equity and learning in schools. This task is especially important, since the dominant literature on school leadership and equity tends to fail to acknowledge the structural constraints on social justice in neoliberal societies (Ward et. al., 2014). As Ball (2012) has argued, the construct of school leadership is often bound up with performativity and 'governing by numbers,' rather than equity. Against this trend, the article attempts to embody equity goals within the school leadership discourse. Its understanding of equity is not connected to the provision of the same educational experiences for all, or even about achieving the same outcomes for all groups irrespective of their characteristics (Lumby & Coleman, 2007). Rather than equity meaning same treatment, it may be better understood as 'giving all children an equal chance to be equipped to live a life they value' (Lumby, 2013, p. 19), which implies giving each child what is needed from their perspective, and this will not be the same in all cases. The second section deals specifically with school autonomy. Starting from an analysis of the current state of school autonomy in European educational systems, it proposes seven general directions for the development of policies on school autonomy that can promote equity and learning. The article concludes with the implications of this discussion for European educational policies.

### **School leadership from the perspective of equity and learning**

This article focuses on school leadership from the perspective of equity and learning. It thus builds upon the conceptual framework defined by the OECD report „*No more failures*” which suggests that *equity* in education can be understood through two closely intertwined dimensions: fairness and inclusion (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007). Fairness implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances, such as gender, socio-economic status, cultural background or ethnic origin, should not be an obstacle to students to achieving the best of their educational potential. Inclusion implies ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all. The perspective of *learning*

in school leadership refers not only to students' experiences in the school, but also to learning experiences of the professionals involved in schooling. Since learning is not a visible process, it cannot be observed or measured. In this sense, learning is always about something we do not know (yet). Tests both on the micro level (classroom) and macro level (system, i.e., PISA) do not assess learning as such, but only its results (Schratz, 2013). Therefore, student achievement results only show how students respond to certain test items and do not mirror a student's capacity for learning. Learning is characterised by a high interconnectedness between cognitive, emotional and action processes and, as such, is a total human experience (Roth, 2001). In this regard, learning is also connected to the attainment of pupil well-being, which has been recognised as an important factor that appears relevant for the achievement of many educational aims (Ots, 2014).

### **School leadership from the perspective of equity**

As Jacky Lumby and others have argued, typically in educational leadership and management discourse it is policy makers or family/society factors that are cited as maintaining inequality, and staff in schools depicted as constrained by the context within which they work (Begley & Johansson, 2003; Lumby, 2013). However, this is a misleading assumption. Schools and school staff also play a part in creating, maintaining or increasing inequality. School leaders who attempt to shift school priorities and practices in fundamental ways usually encounter a modicum of support and a good deal of resistance from teachers and from parents. Teachers may argue, for example, that dismantling tracking jeopardises teaching their subject, or any other subject, well. School leaders who enrol students who are seen by others as „problematic” risk parents' reactions to avoid their school. Absence from schools with a high percentage of immigrant students has been noted in different countries. Above all, school leaders sometimes face a belief that some children are not educable or only educable with great difficulty. The children of immigrant families or of minority ethnic groups are more likely to be seen as having special needs than any other groups, reflecting deeply embedded prejudices that link being perceived as different with being less able. In short, school leaders face unjust discriminatory convictions that underpin many teachers' and parents' judgements about what is right and possible in education. School leaders themselves are not immune from such beliefs and actions. Those who, for example, give entry preference to students with higher attainment, or who allocate the most inexperienced teachers to classes of those perceived as having lower ability, are enacting inequality (Lumby, 2012).

### **School leadership from the perspective of learning**

There is little research that indicates a direct relationship between school leaders' behaviour and practices and students' learning achievement or to teachers' learning (see, for example, Coelli & Green, 2012). According to a much-cited review of the relevant literature by Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004, p. 13), „mostly leaders contribute to student learning indirectly, through their influence on other people or features of their organisations”. As they argue, „leaders' contributions to student learning, then, depend a great deal on their judicious choice of what parts of their organisation to spend time and attention on” (ibid.). On their part, Branch, Hanushek and Rivkin (2009, p. 18) argue that „understanding the impact of principals on learning is a particularly difficult analytical problem. The non-random sorting of principals among schools and consequent difficulty separating the contributions of principals from the influences of peers and other school factors raise questions about the degree to which principals are responsible for differential outcomes”. As they put it, „... it is often quite difficult to distinguish cause and effect, as those anointed as great leaders may simply have been in the right place at the right time” (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012, p. 2). The difficulty in establishing a relationship between school leadership and student performance also surfaces in the analysis of the PISA data. On the basis of the PISA 2009 dataset, a two-level regression model was tested where reading performance was regressed on all PISA learning environment and school climate (student and school level) composite indices. The results showed that before the socio-economic background of students and schools are taken into account the performance of students is positively related to higher values on the index of leadership only in Spain among the EU countries. In contrast, it is negatively related in Slovakia, Finland and Italy (see OECD, 2010, Table IV.2.13b, p. 186). After accounting for the socio-economic background of students and schools, reading performance is (negatively) related to leadership only in Italy.

Although we lack evidence in sufficient amounts and of sufficient quality to serve as powerful guides to policy and practice in school leadership, there are some quite important things that we do know from previous research, which can provide grounds for a number of strong claims on school leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008):

- School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning (leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation).
- School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.

## School autonomy as an area of critical policy attention

The policy of school autonomy has been at the centre of educational reforms in most EU countries since the 1980s. Although its implementation by European governments has been characterised by stark differences (mainly in terms of the time frame, the degrees and the scope of the autonomy granted, and how school autonomy has been combined with the introduction of accountability systems and national or regional frameworks and standards), there is currently a growing consensus amongst researchers and policy makers that school autonomy is a critical factor for improving learning outcomes (Eurydice, 2007). This consensus tends to prioritise the role of school leaders in making important decisions in terms of everyday and long term school management (OECD, 2008). On the other hand, in many countries the influence of central authorities in setting standards, curricula and assessments has been heightened (OECD, 2012).

According to recent report by Eurydice, there appears to be wide autonomy within schools in EU's school systems regarding the choice of teaching methods, the choice of schoolbooks, students' assessment methods, curricular content of optional courses, and grouping of students for learning activities, with the notable exception of Greece where these matters are mainly decided by the educational authorities (apart from students' grouping) (see Eurydice, 2013). Specifically, according to the Eurydice data, in primary and secondary education the choice of teaching methods is left to the discretion of teachers and or school heads/school boards in all EU countries. This is also true for schoolbooks, assessment methods, students' grouping and content of optional courses for all EU school systems monitored by Eurydice. Apart from Greece, in Cyprus and Malta school books are specified by the education authorities, in France this is true for the curricular content of optional courses, and in Portugal and Slovakia for the grouping of students for learning activities. Regarding *staffing and human resources* in primary and secondary education schools, in most EU school systems decision-making is made at school level by the school heads or the school managing body. Overall, schools in Greece, France and Cyprus appear to have no autonomy to decide upon the selection of teaching vacancies, the selection of substituting absent teachers, the dismissal of teachers, the duties and responsibilities of teachers and the selection of school heads; all these matters are the responsibility of the education authorities. In Italy schools can only decide on the duties and responsibilities of teachers and in Malta on the selection of substituting absent teachers (ibid.).

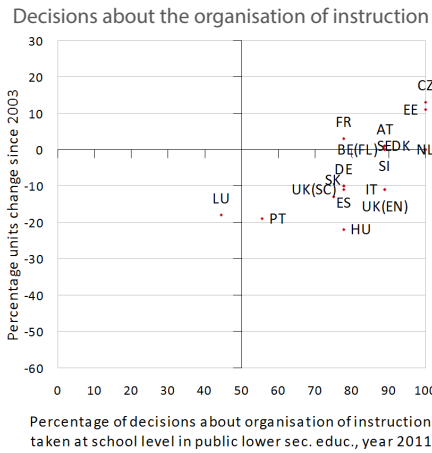
The „*Education at a glance 2012*” OECD annual report indicates important differences in school autonomy policies in Europe. Data obtained from the 2011 OECD-INES Survey on *Locus of Decision-Making* for the school year 2010–11 show that in only ten countries/regions over half of the decisions are taken in full autonomy by schools in public lower secondary education (NL, UK<sub>EN</sub>, SI, EE, CZ, BE<sub>FL</sub>, SK, HU, SI, and IE), while only in four of them (NL, UK<sub>EN</sub>, EE, BE<sub>FL</sub>) more than 70% of the decisions are taken at school level. In thirteen states/regions less than 50% of the decisions are taken in full autonomy by schools in public lower secondary education (UK<sub>SC</sub>, SE, DK, PL, IT, ES, AT, BE<sub>FR</sub>, DE, ES, PT, LU, EL), while in five of them (DE, ES, PT, LU, EL) less than 25% of the decisions are taken at school level (OECD, 2012).

In several EU school systems the percentage of decisions regarding the *organisation of instruction* taken at school level (lower secondary education) has been dropped between 2003 and 2011.<sup>2</sup> For example, in Hungary’s lower secondary education schools (see chart below left) the share of decisions on instructional matters taken at school level dropped by 22 percentage points between 2007 and 2011 (78% from 100%) and transferred to local and central level education authorities. Similar cases represent Portugal (56% from 75% in 2003 – transferred to central level), Luxemburg (44% from 63% – to central), Slovakia (75% from 88% – to central), Italy (89% from 100% – to central), England (89% from 100% – to local). In only two lower secondary education systems there was observed a significant increase in the share of decisions on the organisation of instruction that schools can take, the Czech Republic and Estonia (100% from 88%). Overall, it appears that education reforms have led to less autonomy in schools on matters of instruction over the last decade in many EU school systems at lower secondary education level.

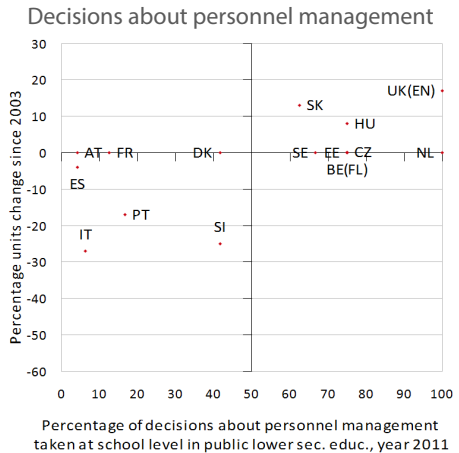
As shown on Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, between 2003 and 2011 reforms have transferred the decision-making power away from schools to higher decision making levels (especially to central level) in the decision-making domains of personnel management, planning and structures, and resources in several lower secondary school systems monitored by OECD in EU. These findings indicate that although there is a growing emphasis in the political discourse on the importance to promote leadership in schools, reforms in many school systems in EU have left schools with less room for manoeuvre in various decision-making domains, and more critically in the organization of instruction.

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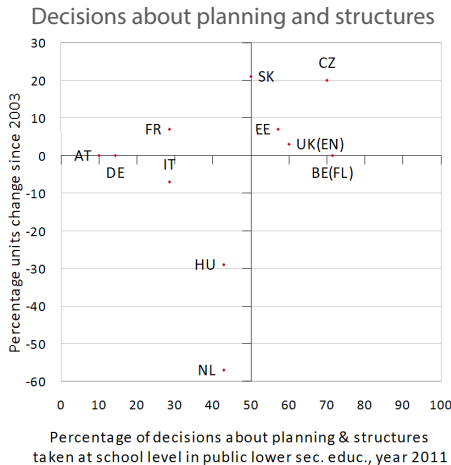
<sup>2</sup> Source: OECD, 2012, Table D6.6a. (Web only). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932668489>.



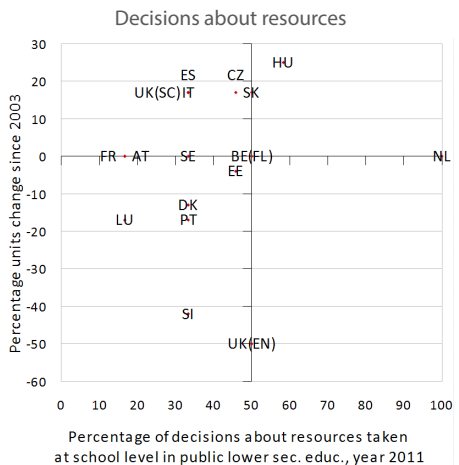
\* For Slovenia the comparison year is 2007.



\* For Slovenia the comparison year is 2007.



\* For Estonia & Scotland the comparison year is 2007.



\* For Belgium-FL, Estonia & Scotland the comparison year is 2007.

**Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4.** Percentage of decisions taken at school level in public lower secondary education in 2011 as compared to 2003 (Source: OECD)<sup>3</sup>

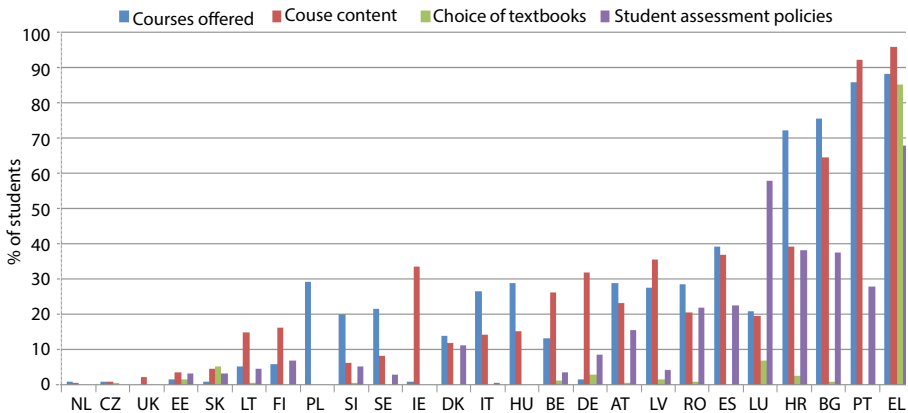
Another source of data on school autonomy is offered by OECD’s PISA 2009. One important qualitative difference between the PISA data and the data from the 2011 OECD-INES Survey on *Locus of Decision-Making* and the Eurydice data that we summarised earlier, is that the latter were obtained

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., data obtained from Tables D6.6a to D6.6d. NOTE: In school systems falling on the upper half of the charts above, there was an increase in the percentage of decisions that schools can make in the respective decision-making domain in 2011 as compared to 2003 and in the lower half there was a decrease. Systems with schools enjoying more autonomy are on the right part of the charts and less on the left.



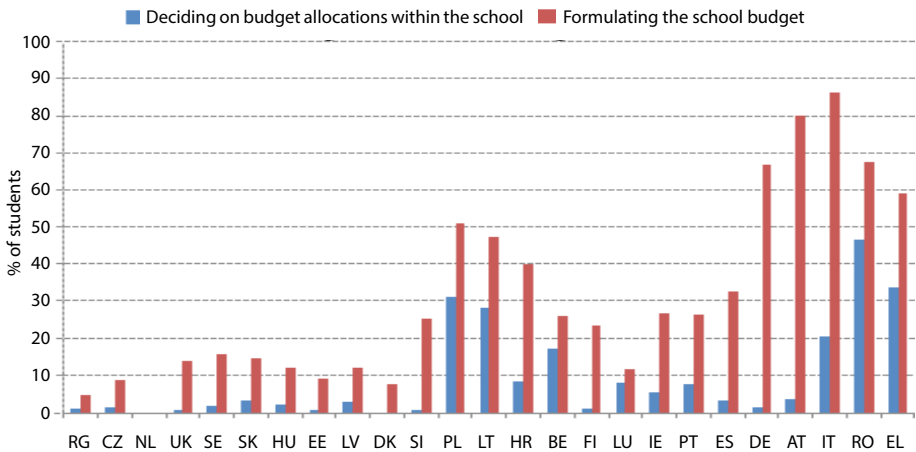
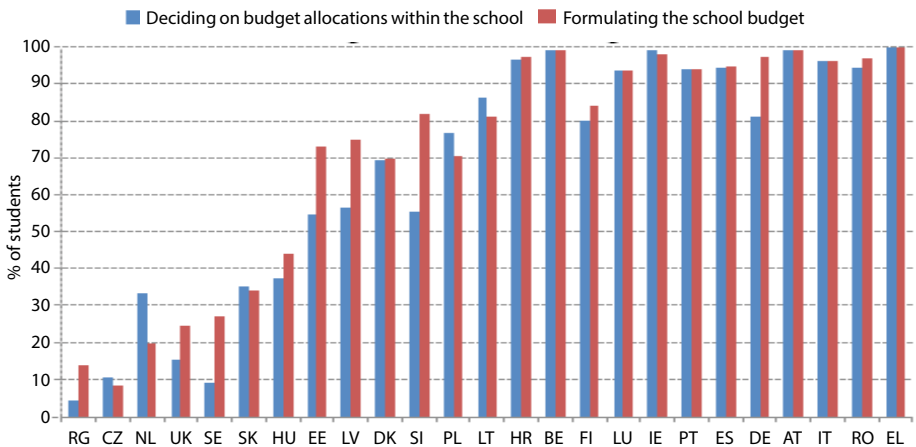
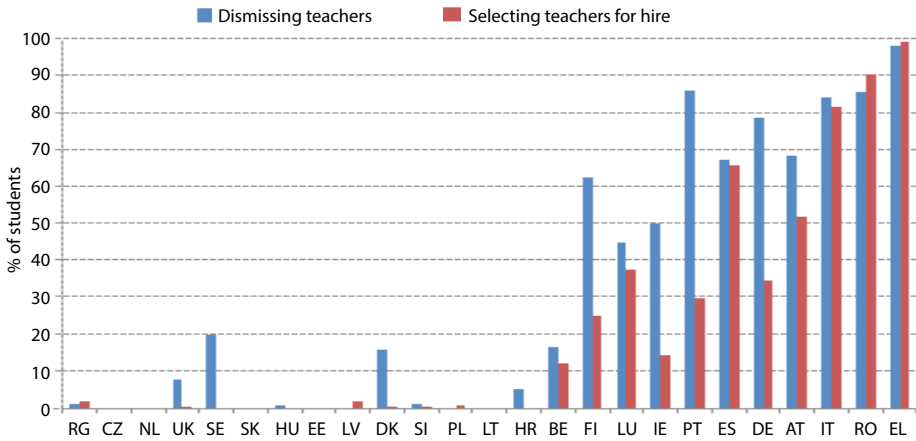
from experts while the former were obtained from school heads in the thousands of schools that participated in the PISA assessments. The PISA results regarding the autonomy that schools have to decide upon matters of *curriculum and assessment* are presented on the chart below.

As shown on Figure 5, in countries such as the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Finland, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden, curriculum and assessment methods are not exclusively decided at national or regional level and the schools have complete autonomy to decide on these matters or they can take such decisions in collaboration with the education authorities. In contrast, in countries such as Greece (EL), Portugal, Bulgaria, and Croatia the regional or national authorities have a very decisive role to play with little involvement from the schools.



**Figure 5.** Percentage of students in schools whose principals reported that only „regional and/or national education authority” have a considerable responsibility for courses and content, textbooks and assessment policies (Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database, table IV.3.6)

As shown on Figure 6, in more than half of the EU countries the decisions to hire and fire teachers are made either at school level or in collaboration with the authorities. In contrast, in most EU countries the salaries of teachers are usually determined exclusively by regional or national authorities. In very few EU countries, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, the UK and Sweden, schools have a say on such matters (see Figure 7). Comparatively, schools even in the most centralised systems in EU, such as Greece, Romania, Italy or Portugal, have more freedom to formulate and manage the school budget (see Figure 8).



**Figures 6, 7 & 8.** Percentage of students in schools whose principals reported that only „regional and/or national education authority” have a considerable responsibility for recourse allocation (Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database, table IV.3.5)

The most critical finding of the PISA 2009 data analysis regarding the importance of autonomy is that school systems that grant individual schools authority to make decisions about curricula and assessments (while limiting school competition) are more likely to be performing above the OECD average and show below-average impact of students' socio-economic background on their performance (OECD, 2010). Notable examples are Finland, the Netherlands, and Estonia all of which have a high degree of autonomy, particularly in matters of organisation of instruction and manage to score at the top of the PISA 2009 assessments while recording comparatively low levels in the relationship between student performance and student socio-economic background.

### **Towards multiple policy frameworks on school autonomy**

The wide divergences that currently exist in Europe in relation to the degrees, the forms, and definitions of school autonomy do not allow for a consideration of European-wide common policies in this area. From a policy perspective, instead of searching for a universal solution on the question of school autonomy, it is important to reflect on context-specific policies on autonomy that aim at the attainment of concrete learning and equity goals.

In the section below, we present seven general directions for policies on school autonomy that are adaptive to the divergent experiences of European educational systems. These policy directions are not monolithic but they can inform different educational contexts as overarching policy considerations through which the question of autonomy can be tackled. They stem from the work that has been conducted in the context of the EPNoSL project – including in-depth reviews of the literature on school autonomy, inputs from EPNoSL's internal and external experts, research conducted by EPNoSL partners, the discourse that took place in EPNoSL's webinars and forums and national workshops organised in several EU countries as well as the peer learning activities undertaken in the past two years.

1. Policies for the promotion of school autonomy should specify *in what decision-making areas school autonomy should be widened (or even narrowed), for which purpose is autonomy granted, and what should be the appropriate mechanisms (accountability systems, overarching frameworks, standards) through which school autonomy can be controlled or counterbalanced*. As a general principle, and depending on how these questions are answered, policy makers need to ensure that policies on school autonomy are contributing in practice to an enabling school leadership environment that is based on trust in the professionalism of school leaders and on mutual understanding.

2. Policies that grant more autonomy to schools and *in parallel promote an over-regulated, bureaucratic and stifling accountability system can be detrimental to the room for manoeuvre that school leaders actually have to promote equity and learning in schools*. This is because school leaders may be required to spend more and more time reporting to educational authorities higher up the hierarchy or performing administrative tasks than organising instruction and school life as a whole in order to promote equity and learning.

3. *Policies on school autonomy should integrate priorities for tackling inequities in educational practice on the ground*. School autonomy becomes a critical policy action for equity goals, as decreasing educational inequities within and amongst schools requires a vast array of initiatives that redress the entire range of discriminatory and exclusionary practices that are produced and re-produced within the school environment.

4. Among the implications of policies that widen school autonomy is that the work of school leaders becomes more demanding and complex. Therefore, reforms that introduce more decision-making powers at school level should be *accompanied by targeted professional development opportunities for school leaders* and changes in the curricula of programmes that prepare future school leaders.

5. *Increased autonomy has an impact on the workload of school leaders*. The widening of the distribution of school leadership tasks and responsibilities is one important option that can help school leaders to deal more effectively with an increased workload. Routine administrative tasks can be transferred to non-teaching support staff in order to leave school leaders with more time to deal with issues that are closely related to learning and equity. In the context of widening school autonomy, policies should also consider measures that offer attractive incentives to existing and prospective school leaders.

6. *In education systems with comparatively low school autonomy in critical decision-making domains directly related to issues of equity and learning such as pedagogy, learning content and assessment methods, there is more pressing need to consider related reforms*. For example, in Greece, Luxembourg and Slovakia policy makers should consider granting schools more autonomy to choose school books, and deciding on instruction time. In several school systems in EU, policy makers should also consider reforms that give more power to schools to influence decision-making on the selection of subjects to be taught in a particular school and the definition of course content (for example, in Austria, Denmark, Greece Ireland, Luxembourg and Spain). More power should also be given to schools to influence decisions upon the allocation of resources for school leaders' and teachers

professional development (for example, in Austria, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain).

7. *The pace with which reforms that grant more autonomy to schools are introduced* is a critical factor in their implementation. Particularly in education systems with a long tradition of centralisation in decision-making and relatively low school autonomy, changes in the governance of schools should be introduced in a gradual manner so that schools become more capable to cope with their new tasks and responsibilities.

## Conclusion

The article has discussed the question of school autonomy in the context of school leadership policy development in Europe. Considering debates on school autonomy from the perspective of school leadership policies might be a productive exercise, since it allows us to ask pertinent questions about whether school autonomy is desirable in a given educational system, under which conditions it should be granted and for what purpose. The article has accordingly tried to articulate a framework where the attainment of equity and learning goals is embodied in the policy thinking and the room for flexibility and autonomy that should be granted to school leaders for making important decisions about their schools.

One has to be careful, here, not to treat school autonomy in isolation from the wider context of educational policies that are implemented within a particular education system (Lauri, 2014; Türk et. al., 2011). Central government policy decisions usually create new realities that in turn pose new challenges for policy making. For example, central government policies that deepen the autonomy of schools can help to establish fertile grounds for the development of school leadership; however, wider autonomy in schools creates in turn new policy challenges related to how central governments can hold school leaders accountable for their decisions.

There are different ways for European states to address policies on school autonomy. For example, EU Member States with a more centralized school system, such as France and Greece will possibly need to consider different policy solutions than EU Member States with highly decentralised school systems, such as Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands, or Member States where there exist more than one school system, such as the United Kingdom, Germany or Belgium. Furthermore, EU Member States which are strongly affected by the economic crisis and have implemented huge cuts in their public expenditures on school education will need to consider solutions that make more efficient use of less available financial resources as compared to

EU Member States that have managed well during the crisis and have maintained or have even increased their public expenditure on school education.

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