

# **Autonomy, Leadership and Leadership Development in England's School System**

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## **Introduction**

Leadership exercised by professionals entails professional responsibility and ‘degrees of autonomy... to exercise professional judgement in the interests of individuals and civil society’ (Englund & Solbrekke 2011: 68). However, in contemporary times the conditions surrounding professionals in education and other sectors are tending to ‘thrust professionals [in education and other sectors] towards “rational” and instrumental effectiveness... at the expense of ethical standards’ (Solbrekke and Sugrue 2011: 20). Taking this concern as its starting point, this article explores pressures and opportunities inherent in leadership and leadership preparation and development in the English school system within a policy context intent on fostering greater autonomy. It presents the outcomes of analyses of autonomy and of conditions affecting leadership preparation and development. These are then used to explore how we can better understand the challenges of exercising leadership and autonomy and the conditions of leadership development that support or hinder ethical autonomy. At the conclusion of the article, implications are suggested for school leaders concerning the conditions for leadership development in schools.

Before describing the approach taken in this article to addressing its task, we briefly explain the policy context in England.

## **Policy context**

Leadership is seen by government as of central importance in achieving the policy aim of school-led and profession-led improvement across the school system in England (DfE 2016a/b). The refrain that ‘school leaders are the drivers of improvement’ is one repeated and emphasised by the Confederation of School Trusts for example (Cruddas 2018: 15 etc.). Aligned with this emphasis on leadership is a policy commitment to autonomy. The Department for Education (DfE) (2016c:8) point to international evidence demonstrating ‘educational performance is improved by giving autonomy for professionals and holding them to account...’. Moreover, it is the autonomy embedded in the academies programme which is claimed to give ‘the best schools and school leaders the ability, money and power to innovate in order to build on their success and spread their reach further for the benefit of a greater number of pupils’ (DfE 2016c: 8). To achieve this aim, the DfE call for more innovative leadership development programmes, with an ‘intensive focus’ on ‘building... leadership capacity’ in the most challenging areas. Increasing diversity in leadership through raising numbers from under-represented groups, such as women and

those with black and ethnic minority backgrounds (DfE 2016: 14, 19) is expressed as a priority.

A self-improving system, which is an influential narrative in England's education policy, recognises plural sources of leadership development (Cruddas 2018, Greany and Higham 2018, Woods et al. 2020). Schools are increasingly expected to take the lead 'in growing the next generation of leaders', through 'spotting, nurturing and managing talented staff, identifying diverse candidates for leadership in sufficient numbers, and ensuring that current and prospective leaders get the professional development they need' (DfE 2016: 41).

Professional qualifications for headship and for middle, senior and executive leadership – intended to foster leadership at 'all levels of the system' (DfE2016a: 43) – are available through a plurality of providers (DfE 2019).

Leadership development is thus conceptualised as an active process across and through the school system - from classroom to system level, through inter-school relationships and groups of schools, including multiple academy trusts, teaching school alliances (TSAs), federations and school clusters, supported by formal programmes and qualifications of leadership development. Such ambitious aspirations for leadership development in and across schools accord with our view that leadership preparation and development can take numerous forms - for example, through teacher leadership with teachers leading change, self-development by school leaders, courses, coaching and mentoring, and experiential learning which includes reflection on leadership practice and the leadership of change (Woods et al. 2020, Woods and Roberts 2016). The view taken in this article therefore is that leadership capability is not a static capability that is achieved, but a variable that is continually developed and shaped through practice and formal and informal preparation and development activities. Such leadership activities can be exercised both by those in designated leadership roles, such as headteacher and middle leader, and others in non-positional roles, such as teachers, support staff and students.

It should be noted that the claims, practical consequences and direction of travel of policy in England concerning education and leadership are contested and the subject of much critical research. Issues include fragmentation of the school system alongside increased centralisation that many see as squeezing local, school and professional autonomy; challenges to transparency and accountability as more schools become part of multi-academy trusts; and competitive and entrepreneurial pressures with which school leaders need to engage, striving to sustain professional values as well as meet performative imperatives (e.g. Bubb

et al 2019, Glatter 2020 [SLAM special issue], Greany and Higham 2018, Keddie 2017, West and Wolfe 2018, Woods and Simkins 2014). In this article, we make our starting point the official intent of fostering greater autonomy in the school system and explore pressures and opportunities in leadership and leadership preparation and development within that context.

## **The approach taken to our analysis of autonomy and leadership development<sup>1</sup>**

In this article we bring together the **conceptual frameworks and conclusions developed in two chapters where, drawing on research and policy literature, we examined** aspects of the school system in England (Woods et al 2020a/b). This is done in order to frame thinking about the challenges entailed in autonomy and leadership.

The first of these was a contribution to a volume comparing national agencies and authorities and their influence on schools in 20 countries and seeking to develop a theoretical perspective of governance and schools (Ärlestig and Johansson 2020) . Our contribution examined autonomy and regulation in England's school system and explored the claimed institutional and professional autonomy integral to the idea of a self-improving school-led system influential in the national policy driving change; defining autonomy as the capability to adopt for oneself the principles, rules or values that guide one's action, it particularly highlighted the ethical challenges of autonomy (Woods et al., 2020b). In the following section we summarise the conceptual outcomes of this analysis which seek to clarify the position of autonomy in a self-improving system and identify aspects of autonomy that help in understanding issues in the practice of autonomy.

The second was an examination of school leadership preparation and development in England (Woods 2020a). We explained how developments in school leadership preparation and development had to be understood in the context of England's radically changing school system. A key part of the analysis was a critical examination of the systemic conditions for school leadership preparation and development. To do this, we used a model of systemic conditions of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin 2017) and strength (Jarvis 2018) to examine some of the pressures and opportunities concerning leadership development in the English school system. Kinchin (2017) originally developed

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<sup>1</sup> From this point in the article, leadership development refers to leadership preparation and development.

his systemic conditions model to gain a better understanding of issues concerning learning and teaching in UK universities. The model identifies areas that affect pedagogy and which may lead to systemic pedagogical weakness, namely:

- the regulative discourse
- the locus of control
- the relationship to the discipline
- the relationship to research

Depending on their characteristics, these create the conditions for pedagogical frailty, or pedagogical strength (Jarvis 2018); that is, they influence the quality of pedagogical practice for worse or better. Kinchin used concept mapping to develop the model, exploring academics' understanding of higher education practice. We used the framework to examine the conditions of leadership development in the English school system and to consider sources of factors impacting upon leadership development (Woods et al. 2020a). Following the discussion of autonomy, a brief account is given of the issues that arose from our analysis of conditions of leadership development.

**Based** on the examinations of autonomy and conditions of leadership development, **the attention of the article then focuses particularly on the ethical dimension of autonomy in leadership. We explore conditions and obstacles affecting leadership and principled autonomy** in a school system where autonomy and innovation are proclaimed drivers of improvement.

## **Autonomy**

In this section, we identify aspects of autonomy that help in understanding issues in its practice. As a basis for this, we first discuss the position of autonomy in a self-improving system.

### ***Autonomy in a self-improving system***

Current policy seeks to develop 'a *self-improving* school system' characterised by 'school-led improvement' in a quest to raise standards of schooling on a sustainable basis (DfE 2016b: 20; original emphasis). The intensified reforms in the structure of English school education since 2010 have not followed any blueprint of a self-improving system design. However, the idea of a 'self-

improving school-led system' (SISS) is influential in English educational policy. It is described as an 'overarching narrative' for policy on schools by Greany and Higham (2018: 10) and has further diminished the role of local authorities (LAs), creating a new kind of 'middle tier' which is continuing to evolve and create challenges (Bubb et al 2019, Woods and Simkins 2014).

Hargreaves (2010, 2012) describes a SISS in terms of four building blocks:

- family clusters of schools which provide the structural framework and facilitate active collaboration, sharing of ideas and school improvement.
- a local solutions approach in which schools identify and analyse problems, generate ways of tackling these problems and free themselves from a dependence on solutions provided by others: autonomy is part-and-parcel of this local approach to creating solutions.
- co-construction, which involves working collaboratively to agree on the problems and priorities to be tackled and to design and implement change: joint practice development is key to this, instead of the transferring of good practice.
- system leadership, exercised by actors in the system at all levels.

Whilst the English school system has not been designed to replicate these building blocks, some of the thinking in Hargreaves' SISS model is discernible in English policy on school education. 'Autonomous academies' outside the responsibility of LAs (DfES 2016a: 20) are seen to give 'more freedom and autonomy to headteachers and leaders' (p3), 'set school leaders free', leave behind 'stifling' and 'micromanaging' government (p10), empower 'great teachers and leaders' (p55) and give 'teachers professional autonomy over how to teach' (p89). A central role is given to 'supported autonomy' – that is, 'strengthening the infrastructure that supports all schools and their leaders to collaborate effectively' (DfE 2016a: 18), enabling 'the best headteachers to extend their influence beyond their own schools and help them to raise standards across the system' (p72).

Autonomy in practice takes place in the contexts that exert pressures to respond and act in certain ways. For example, despite the importance of collaboration in SISS, there is evidence of widespread competition between schools, together with the

development of new incentives and areas for competition such as school improvement services (Greany and Higham 2018). It is striking that although over 90% of secondary school headteachers in Greany and Higham's (2018: 57) study experience competition, only a small minority (12%) report any benefits. **Increasing numbers of academies are joining multi-academy trusts (MATs). A MAT is a governance framework which academies may choose or be required to join in which a group of schools is governed through a single set of trust members and directors; the MAT is expected to support school-led improvement (DfE 2016a).** For many school leaders loss of autonomy is a necessary trade-off for the potential benefits of being part of a MAT (Ofsted 2019); and autonomy is found to be significantly lower for teachers in School Trusts in England (Worth and Van den Brande 2020). **MATs are not all the same, with some seeking to create a collaborative culture; however, there is evidence that accountability and competitive pressures act as disincentives to collaboration within and between MATs (Baxter and Floyd 2019, Greany and Higham 2018).**

To help in understanding what such tensions and pressures can mean for autonomy and leadership, summarising our argument in Woods et al (2020b), we consider the various aspects of autonomy, beginning with an explanation of how we conceptualise autonomy.

### ***Aspects of autonomy***

Autonomy is used in this article to mean the capability to adopt for oneself the principles, rules or values that guide one's action. The etymology of the word - *autos* meaning self and *nomos* law – points us towards an understanding of autonomy as the condition in which a person or an entity, such as a country or organisation, can adopt guiding principles, rules and values without coercion, 'free from the prescriptions of others and of convention' (Baggini 2015: 101). The person or entity is able to choose what is important to them in moving them to act, particularly 'normative principles about what is worthwhile - that is, a conception, perhaps somewhat inchoate, about what makes a life well lived' (Brink 2003: 28).

In Woods et al (2020b), we examined different ways in which autonomy understood in this way is constructed and experienced in practice. The aspects of autonomy examined in that analysis are summarised in this section.

*Licensed autonomy* refers to the granting of autonomy as a professional, signified by gaining an appropriate licence (Apple 2007, Lundström 2015). The

notion can be applied equally to institutions. Academies in England, granted licensed autonomy as a school by virtue of their academy status, are afforded autonomies that other institutions do not have, creating a hierarchical distinction between institutions.

*Regulated autonomy* refers to a person or institution being compelled to adopt purposes and principles to guide their action. For Apple (2007) and Lundström (2015), regulated autonomy represents a particular way of distorting professional autonomy. Their conception of regulated autonomy refers to professional practice that is framed by policy discourses and requirements in such a way that its proclaimed autonomy is not the result of independent choices but of professional identities and values that conform to performative and competitive logics.

In practice, significant constraints always surround autonomy and so it is, in reality, inevitably *conditional autonomy*. This is to acknowledge that autonomy is affected by a range of factors, to do with resources, opportunities, relationships and awareness of how one will be held to account for decisions and practices autonomously determined. Some such factors will be enabling whilst others are constraining. A simple analytical scheme allows us to contrast these. *Positive conditional autonomy* occurs where the enabling conditions are greater or more important than the constraining conditions and support autonomy. *Negative conditional autonomy* occurs where the constraining conditions are greater or more important than the enabling conditions and limit autonomy. However, these do not negate the essence of autonomy in the way that the policy frameworks and persuasive policy discourses do in regulated autonomy. Negative conditional autonomy markedly constrains the scope for autonomy harder; yet, as Lundström (2015: 74) observes, 'there may still be latitude for teacher autonomy even within an overall trend towards reduced autonomy'.

Accountability is a condition of autonomy. It is emphasised by government that autonomy has to be accountable, asserting that a 'more autonomous school-led system depends even more on a fair and effective accountability system' (DfE 2016a: 21). This is clear too in Hargreaves' conception of a SISS, where school clusters 'need to be accountable for what they do and for their added value' (Hargreaves 2010: 19). Educators are expected to live up to expectations relating to norms of practice, and hence are accountable for this (Hargreaves 2014: 705). The appropriate nature of accountability will differ according to circumstances and roles. Such accountability may be upwards in a hierarchy (within a school or a MAT, or to central government, for example), and/or it may be lateral accountability (to colleague leaders and teachers for example).

Whilst school leaders in England are subject to what is often seen as heavy top-down accountability (Glatter 2020 [SLAM special issue], accountability lines can also be obscured. For example, West and Wolfe (2018) explain how the academies system reduces public accountability. Such reduction can lead to *unaccountable autonomy* which is not transparent and open to observation and proper review by others.

The exercise of autonomy does not guarantee ethical choices and practices. The ethical issue – that is, the question of *ethical autonomy* - is at the heart of autonomy. For the purpose of this article, by ethical autonomy we mean the approach taken to moral issues and choices by those exercising autonomy. A specific view of justifiable ethical autonomy – namely, principled autonomy – is defined in the following discussion.

**Ethical autonomy** raises the question of the validity or soundness of the source of ethical justification behind the adoption of such principles. Drawing on O'Neill (2003) and his analysis of Kantian autonomy, we distinguish between two kinds of justification. One is an arbitrary choice to defer to a source of claimed moral direction, which could be the church, the 'edicts of rulers', subjective feelings of moral rightness or 'the will of the majority' (p9-10). This *dependent autonomy* resonates with the philosophy of dependence - a view that people, in order to act ethically, have to be controlled and directed by the right rules, texts or leaders (Woods 2016, Woods & Roberts 2018). Dependent autonomy is not truly ethical from the Kantian perspective; making a choice as to which moral guide to defer to does not in itself establish that it is a valid source of ethical rightness. In education, following the requirements of policy for example does not automatically make choices guided by these requirements ethical. Although it can be legitimately argued that educators funded by public money have some ethical duty to follow democratically legitimated policy decisions, there are other ethical issues too that are relevant to deciding what is morally right action.

The second justification is the basis for *principled autonomy*. From a Kantian view, choices to be ethical must have two features. The first is that they are grounded in some kind of reasoning rather than being based solely on enthusiasm or flights of fancy (O'Neill 2003: 14), or the inspirational influence and arguments of a charismatic leader. The second is that the principles that guide the choices should have universal applicability (op cit: 15). Thus, principled autonomy encourages the asking of critical questions by school leaders and others about, for example, policies followed by the school – such as 'Would I

commend these as policies that all schools should follow?'. Such critical reflection is not so much a characteristic of the *person*, but rather a feature of the *processes* they follow, which must involve reflexive thinking and challenging questions about the validity of principles on which choices are based (op cit: 16).

Autonomy in school leadership and leadership development is complex and at its heart are ethical questions concerning what fundamentally guides leadership decisions and actions. We turn now to the systemic conditions affecting leadership development.

## **Frailty and strength in leadership development**

In this section we give a brief account of the issues that arose from our analysis of leadership development (Woods et al 2020) using Kinchin's (2017) systemic conditions model.

### ***Regulative discourse***

The regulative discourse concerns the values and the fundamental normative purposes that underpin and are expressed in policy articulations, local discourses and assumptions about leadership development. We highlighted two tensions that serve to weaken the development of leadership, increasing its frailty.

The first tension relates to the purpose of education. Any view of what constitutes good leadership is based on a conception of what education is for. A problematic tension exists between economic aims, prioritising instrumental educational outcomes and commodifying education, and aims that have intrinsic value, such as the appreciation and learning of cultural knowledge as a good in itself. The second tension is between the traditional, hierarchical model of leadership and distributed models of leadership. The value of the latter is recognised in the discourse, and this, we argue, is a source of potential pedagogic strength. However, the tendency to revert to a familiar focus on positional leadership roles and seek 'great leaders' (DfE 2016: 14) is a weakening factor.

### ***Locus of control***

We use the term 'locus of control' to refer to where authority and power reside to shape leadership development - how far it is centralised or rests at local level or is distributed across various levels. More plural systems of provision for leadership development may facilitate innovation and variety which are

potentially sources of pedagogic strength. However, concerns around quality assurance, whether achieved through agencies with a co-ordinating role, a market model or a self-improvement model of provision, are also pertinent. There are issues concerning the practical power of providers and leaders or aspiring leaders to exercise autonomy in the development of leadership. If inequalities in opportunities to develop and nurture agency and the capacity for autonomy prevail, the system-wide capacity for leadership development will be lessened, increasing its frailty.

### ***Relationship to the discipline***

We use 'relationship to the discipline' to refer to the relationship between the practices of leadership development (pedagogy) and the understanding and practice of leadership (the discipline). Distributed leadership, raised above in relation to the regulative discourse, is also relevant here, as the way leadership is perceived and projected through policy discourses is influential in defining what is taken to be the nature of leadership. What leadership is understood to be shapes pedagogies of leadership development.

We would argue that there is much evidence and convincing argument to affirm that the nature of leadership is in fact distributed (Woods and Roberts 2018). It is the product of complex processes and interactions across an organisation and system, with numerous organisational actors influencing others - whether designated as leaders or not - through their interconnections. These leadership-generating interactions involve both those in formal positions of leadership (positional leaders, such as headteachers, executive heads and middle leaders) and those who are not (students, teachers, support staff and others). The pedagogy of leadership is strengthened if programmes for professional learning are designed to foster the skills and attributes needed to enhance this approach.

### ***Relationship to research***

The relationship to research concerns the extent to which leaders and leadership development facilitators are also researchers and enquirers into leadership practice and the extent to which leadership development is informed by research. As well as research by academic researchers, there is a vital role for research and enquiry by practitioners to advance leadership development. This includes research and enquiry by those exercising non-positional leadership such as teachers, students and support staff in schools. We argue that increasing the scope for critical and questioning research independent of the interests and

priorities of leadership development providers and government increases the pedagogical strength of leadership development.

In summary, the above discussion, based on Woods et al. (2020), drew attention to issues raised through consideration of the model of systemic conditions fostering frailty or strengths in leadership development. These issues, set out in Table 1, concern educational purposes and the influence of ideas of distributed leadership in the discourse framing leadership development; the policy intention to generate distributed development, dispersing the locus of control for leadership development; the relationship between pedagogies of leadership development and the distributed nature of leadership; and the relationship between leadership development and knowledge creation concerning leadership.

**[Insert Table 1 and caption here]**

## **LEADERSHIP AND PRINCIPLED AUTONOMY**

This section draws from the above discussions of autonomy and conditions of leadership development to consider the challenges for leadership in a system where leading with autonomy is integral to the drive for school improvement. It was concluded above that ethical issues are at the heart of autonomy, since autonomy is about adopting without coercion the principles to guide action and decisions about what constitutes right action. Autonomy can only be justified or have worth if it is advancing purposes with ethical value. The extent to which principled autonomy is exercised is therefore of crucial importance in considering the value of autonomy. **In this section, we explore challenges concerning principled autonomy in light of the strengths and frailties identified in Table 1 and with reference to the different ways, discussed above, in which autonomy can be constructed and experienced. The importance we attach to principled autonomy** chimes with Hargreaves (2012: 16) who gives collective moral purpose a central place in a self-improving system, arguing that it 'is not primarily for financial reward or for social status that teachers do what they do, but rather because preparing the next generation to be fully realised individuals and to create a better society are at the very heart of what education is for'.

**The discussion in this section proceeds as follows. Firstly, we acknowledge the relationship between the regulative discourse and its frailties and the challenge leaders face of engaging with profound, value-laden questions of educational**

purpose and practice. Secondly, we give extended attention to critical reflexivity and its importance for principled autonomy, highlighting implications for the systemic conditions of leadership development (Table 1). Thirdly, we conclude the section by distinguishing between external conditions, which include systemic conditions of leadership development, and leaders' internal processes; we suggest the internal processes, shaped but not determined by external conditions, forge the kind of autonomy exercised by the person or collectively and the extent to which it has the characteristics of regulated, dependent or principled autonomy.

### ***The regulative discourse and value-laden questions of purpose and practice***

Taking ethics and values seriously raises profound questions concerning what matters most. Issues such as the survival and performative success of a school in a pressured system are weighed in the balance with other values. Questions concerning the purpose of education inevitably pervade the practice of educational leaders: these include the worthiness of serving economic demands, which foster competitive, entrepreneurial values; the place and priority of values of citizenship and collaboration in education; and the balance between instrumental and intrinsic values. In dealing with these challenges, the regulative discourse may be a source of strength, supportive of seeking an appropriate balance between differing purposes, or, as suggested in Table 1, a source of frailty creating problematic tensions and imbalances in educational purposes between instrumental, economic aims and intrinsic, cultural aims.

The extent to which the regulative discourse fosters values and practices of collaboration or competition is a particularly important issue. Much research suggests that a social environment which exhibits trust and connectivity - a regular and frequent pattern of active relationships and communication between organisational members, especially across traditional boundaries - is important in enabling innovative agency by individuals working together; on the other hand, competition, sharp hierarchies and hard organisational boundaries tend to create conditions less conducive to developing trust, connectivity and collaboration (Bunderson and Reagans 2011, Hargreaves 2012, McElroy, 2010, Miettinen 2013, Seel, 2006, Woods and Roberts 2013/2018, Woods et al 2006). If competition is high and acting as an incentive against principled autonomy, and is not the 'friendly competition' Hargreaves refers to (2010: 8), the regulative discourse would be best employed in reducing this. Regulative discourses at

national, local and school levels have a role to play in creating a climate conducive to collaborative leadership at all levels in the school system.

### ***Critical reflexivity***

Principled autonomy requires critical reflexivity, involving an examination of the principles guiding action to ensure emerging choices are justifiable and morally worthy for everyone to choose – that is, of universal applicability. If we wish to aspire to principled autonomy, simply following a policy line or the demands of competitive pressures or procedures laid down as best practice is not the justifiable option. **Critical reflexivity is therefore given extended attention here and implications for the systemic conditions of leadership development (regulative discourse, locus of control, relationship to the discipline and relationship to research) highlighted.**

Leadership that seeks to enact principled autonomy cannot be conducted as a technical activity in which the ethical dimension is marginalised or responsibility for reflecting on and coming to conclusions about ethical matters is delegated to certain levels in the system, such as MAT leaders or national authorities. Such leadership demands ethical reflection and decision-making and an openness to challenging received wisdom, and hence also self-awareness concerning one's most fundamental and worthy values and purposes. Values clarification to achieve such an awareness is crucial to developing collaborative leadership that initiates and collectively leads change to enhance opportunities for holistic learning for all (Woods and Roberts 2018). We would agree with the philosophy that 'human beings, regardless of their circumstances, have an intrinsic capacity to generate value and meaning personally and interpersonally in their own lives and in the lives of others' and that the point of education is to bring about such value generation (Heffron 2018: 103). There is a universal imperative in this viewpoint which sits well with an aspiration to principled autonomy. An essential goal of education is enabling all educators and learners to 'act with autonomy and play an active part in leadership as an emergent process arising out of people's everyday actions and interactions' (Woods and Roberts 2018: 1). Educational leadership based on such principles will aspire to working holistically with the aim of allowing individuals to actualise their values and fulfil their potential. The point is to help develop people's capabilities to reflect upon and choose for themselves the principles, rules and values that guide their action.

Such an emphasis on reflexivity can be seen as part of a larger social change. Reflexivity is not new as it is part of living as a social being. What is new,

according to Archer (2012: 3) is a 'reflexive imperative' that means that reflexivity is needed more and is considerably more extensive than in earlier times. This imperative in contemporary society, as articulated in Archer's work, is the result of intensified cultural and structural change and an exponential growth in innovation and the choices which individuals face. England's school system – characterised by increased structural complexity, innovation and varying local combinations and structures of schools – **is complex and particularly challenging for school leaders to navigate and interpret (Glatter 2020 [SLAM special issue], Greaney and Higham 2018, Woods and Simkins 2014, Woods et al 2020b/c). That makes it**, arguably, a dramatic example of this wider trend, generating the need for new choices by educational leaders, teachers and others and re-appraisals of old assumptions and practices through intensive reflective practice.

Such reflexivity needs to be both creative and critical, responding to problems and writing new social scripts and practices, proactively examining the principles and values held by the self (or group) and identifying assumptions and blind-spots about the educational and social justice aims of education (Carroll 2015, Woods and Roberts 2018). It involves individual and collective questioning that is both self-critical and critically evaluative of practice.

Critical reflexivity and **principled** autonomy, it might be argued, are ideals that have to be sacrificed in the circumstances offered by England's school system, with its complexity and pressures, including those of competition and performance evaluation which create 'winners and losers' (Greaney and Higham 2018: 17). In this argument, the 'values of the market' are part of a 'new moral environment' for schools and educators and, with an impetus to 'survivalism' underpinned by pragmatic rationales for focusing on the interests of one's own institution, create a common purpose privileging 'pragmatism and self-interest rather than professional judgement and ethics' (Ball 2001: xxxiv). An ethic of surviving and winning trumps other concerns.

Heffron (2018) provides an account of Japanese Soka philosophy that challenges this argument and is pertinent to the practicality of exercising **principled** autonomy. Educational leaders do not need to be in or to construct first a context conducive to their way of thinking and being in order to live out an authentic practice of leadership. The guiding aim in this philosophy is to find the present possibilities for 'value creation', which consists of 'the deliberate process of educating individuals out of inexperience, out of dependency on the work and thought of others' (p106) and increasing the amount of good, beauty and benefits for others and the environment in the world we touch. Value creation is about

making the best of the conditional autonomy we have. The context – the conditions of autonomy – in which educational leaders find themselves constitutes their ‘working materials’ (p106) which they can work with in order to create value as best possible in those circumstances. How this practical value creation might be done in the circumstances, with the ‘working materials’ available, requires the critical reflexivity highlighted above. Heffron (2018: 107) draws attention, *inter alia*, to Soka philosophy’s advocacy of educational leader’s studying the social realities and real-life circumstances of the people whom education serves and not operating ‘out of blind intuition or dogma’. That is, they need to avoid, in our terms, dependent autonomy.

We turn now to implications arising from this discussion for the systemic conditions of leadership development. Features that would strengthen their potential to foster critical reflexivity are suggested.

The regulative discourse has a role to play in making clear that a high value is placed on critical reflexivity. The discourse can affirm that leadership in schools requires ethical reflection and decision-making and an openness to challenging received wisdom, as well as self-awareness concerning one’s most fundamental and worthy values and purposes. It can make explicit that these are integral to leadership development.

Also relevant to critical reflexivity are our suggestions concerning the distributed nature of leadership in relation to the regulative discourse and the understanding of the nature of leadership underpinning leadership development (the relationship to the discipline) (Table 1). We suggest that the regulative discourse is giving insufficient recognition to leadership as a distributed process and privileging reliance on traditional hierarchical leadership and ‘great leaders’; which also tends to distort pedagogies of leadership development. One of the problems with reliance on senior leaders as *the* source of leadership is that examination of crucial issues that arise with greater autonomy, including the ethical aspects of autonomy, come to be the responsibility of a narrow group high in the hierarchy. An imperative to engage in critical reflexivity, however, is not only for the higher reaches of a hierarchy, but is pervasive, drawing the many to consider key leadership questions. If leadership is about vision and change, anyone who engages with and influences the assumptions, values and ideas that underpin these is in some way contributing to the emergent leadership in their setting. For a system that aspires to be self-improving and to foster widespread autonomy, leadership distribution needs to be an explicit aim that refashions understanding of leadership and thereby approaches to leadership development.

The discussion above concerning critical reflexivity has important implications for the locus of control for leadership development and the issue of distributed development (Table 1). The possibility that schools and educational leaders might create value in their own circumstances, by working with others and applying critical reflexivity, has implications for both the potential benefits and challenges of distributed development. Educators have the potential to take the lead in developing leadership (their own and others), and hence innovation and responsiveness to local and specific circumstances can grow. Constraining circumstances do not negate this potential. Even negative conditional autonomy – where the constraining conditions on autonomy are greater than the enabling conditions – allows some room for autonomy. For educators the imperative is to find that room and work, with others, with the materials at hand.

There are implications for knowledge creation and the relationship of leadership development to research (Table 1). Leadership and leadership development are weakened the more limited is the scope for critical questioning and for research independent of the interests and priorities of leadership development providers and government. The nature of this frailty can be described in terms of Gunter's (2016a/b) knowledge domains. A privileging of the instrumental domain, which is focused on how change can be delivered and on evidence of compliance, eclipses other knowledge domains. These eclipsed domains comprise, in Gunter's terms, the humanistic domain, focusing on understanding the experience of change; the philosophical domain, generating debates about understanding change and what it means; and the critical domain, which involves differing ideological positions that interrogate change from their differing perspectives. Concern about knowledge domains applies not only to research by academics and professional researchers, but also to practitioners who undertake research and enquiry to inform practice. An approach to research and knowledge creation that is dominated by an instrumental approach reinforces autonomy that is ill-thought through, rendering principled autonomy more difficult to exercise.

### ***External conditions and internal intentions***

Regulated autonomy discourages critical reflexivity. Regulated autonomy is defined as autonomy where the person or institution has taken on a purpose and principles through compulsion or without reflecting on the strong factors influencing why they adopt certain purposes and principles. Consequently, it is not a true form of autonomy. What is absent is any genuinely free adoption of

principles, rule or values to guide action. An example would be an unthinking acceptance of dominant ideas and values in the discourse of a school which are strongly projected by those in powerful positions, leading to what Stacey (2012) calls coercive persuasion. This says nothing about the 'rightness' or 'ethicality' of these ideas and values. Rather, it is about the lack of thought on the part of the adopter of these, and this lack undermines autonomy. By comparison, in another instance, some thought and weight may be given to the authority carried by the requirements of a national policy document and a conscious decision made to follow those requirements. This comes nearer to dependent autonomy, but is in some meaningful way an autonomous choice.

What may be seen as esoteric questions about the existence or otherwise of autonomy actually raise real-life issues about autonomous practice. Greany and Higham (2018: 34) conclude that the English school system offers 'coercive autonomy'. By this they mean schools are offered more discretion and responsibility, but also closer monitoring; that any discretion schools have is to do with operational powers not criteria powers that enable the setting of educational aims and purposes; and that hierarchical powers impacting upon schools, making them become academies or reducing their operational discretion for example, lessen their autonomy. A **more nuanced** exploration of coercive autonomy is facilitated by an analysis of autonomy set out above and suggests two things.

The first is that schools have conditional autonomy, conditioned heavily in different ways by different sources of hierarchical authority, such as government and MATs. Conditional autonomy is not the absence of autonomy but autonomy that it is contextually constrained. The critical question in relation to education is the justification and legitimacy of the specific conditions being applied, and their transparency. As the study by Worth and Van den Brande (2020: 20) observes, getting 'the right balance between alignment and autonomy at multiple levels (Trust, school, subject/phase, teacher) is an important issue for leaders of School Trusts as the system develops'. The implication is that a much more detailed analysis and debate is needed about what kinds of autonomy are valid and beneficial at what levels in the system.

The second point is that coercive autonomy hints that the system may be characterised in reality by regulated autonomy. However, the extent to which that is so depends on the degree and depth of reflection by educators in their specific contexts and in relation to the constraints to autonomy they are experiencing. The practice of ethical, principled autonomy is real even in the most constrained circumstances and the creation of value for others, even if restricted, is genuine.

To conclude, there are two perspectives from which to view autonomy. One is external, viewing the external conditioning of autonomy, which the notions of coercive and regulated autonomy particularly highlight. External conditions, **which include systemic conditions of leadership development**, may constrain or **enhance** the possibilities for autonomy. The mixture of constraining and enabling factors may differ for different leaders and levels in the system, distributing different degrees of negative and positive conditional autonomy through the system.

The other perspective is internal, which concerns the generation of autonomy from the individual's deliberations, critical reflexivity, commitments and intentionality (Woods and Roberts 2018). This does not necessarily mean isolated, individualistic processes. Individual reflections can be part of social activity, internal deliberations being shared with others and resultant interactions and conversations in turn being reflected upon internally. The internal processes **interpret and work with and on the constraining and enabling factors in the external conditions, and through this** forge the **kind of** autonomy exercised by the person or collectively by a group, shaping the extent to which it has the characteristics of regulated, dependent or principled autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

We conclude by suggesting implications, arising from the foregoing discussion, for school leaders. We suggest that it would be valuable for school leaders, concerned to develop leadership across the school, to give attention to the features that constitute the conditions for such development as they impact upon and are shaped within in their school – that is, the regulative discourse, locus of control, relationship to the discipline and relationship to research (Table 1). School leaders (positional and non-positional) are both situated within these conditions, as influenced by government and others, and interpreters of and contributors to the conditions as they affect leadership in schools. The implications concern how these conditions can be shaped to foster leadership that exercises autonomy guided by ethical principles.

Firstly, there are implications concerning school leaders' contributions to the regulative discourse. How leadership is talked and written about in the school can encourage or discourage critical reflexivity about leadership practice and development and through this foster or deter the exercise of principled autonomy. Encouragement is more likely to be apparent where, for example, ideas are

shared that promote critical questioning of the effects of competitive and performative logics on educational aims and learning experiences; and that show awareness of the value of resisting reversion to reliance on traditional hierarchical leadership and 'great leaders', giving sustained and in-depth attention to leadership distribution.

Secondly, there are implications for school leaders' influence on the locus of control of leadership development. An important consideration is the degree to which bottom-up initiatives, from teachers, students and others, to develop as leaders of change are facilitated and enabled to shape the focus of change. A key question concerns the balance between top-down control of leadership development, concerned with alignment with the school's goals, and bottom-up initiatives. Striving for the appropriate balance involves tipping the balance towards positive conditional autonomy whilst, through ways of seeking alignment, avoiding unaccountable autonomy. A further question for attention is who is involved in making and reviewing that balance.

Thirdly, there are implications concerning how leadership is developed in the school and whether it reflects the nature of leadership as a distributed process. (This concerns the relationship of leadership development pedagogy to the discipline.) One implication is to recognise the importance of fostering ways of doing leadership development in school that are based on understanding leadership as a distributed practice. This involves supporting, through coaching for example, spaces for thinking and agency in which non-positional and positional leaders find creative ways of mediating structural constraints (Woods and Roberts 2018: 101-102). It includes reflecting on autonomy in their leadership practice – for example, the kind of conditional autonomy they experience (and the localised factors affecting this), the extent of principled autonomy practised, and whether and at what times their leading practices resemble regulated autonomy or dependent autonomy.

Fourthly, there are implications for the relationship of leadership development to research. Leadership development is strengthened where the scope for doing practitioner research and enquiry and for drawing on bodies of independent research is high. Research and enquiry require sufficient positive conditional autonomy for those leading change to take the initiative in drawing from all of the knowledge domains, not just the instrumental domain.

The fifth implication is an overarching one. If prime importance is attached to principled autonomy, however constrained day-to-day autonomy may be, this does not eradicate the imperative to principled autonomy. It only reinforces the necessity

for critical reflexivity. Such criticality is essential to working out, in the conditional autonomy of any given circumstances, priorities and possibilities. For leaders at all levels, a key question is: Which are the most pressing challenges to improving education so that it enhances social justice and what are the possibilities for value creation that will help meet these? In the quest for principled autonomy in leadership, nurturing the practice of critical reflexivity is essential throughout the conditions highlighted by the systemic conditions model.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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	sources of strength / frailty
<b>Regulative discourse</b>	<p><b>educational purposes in the discourse</b></p> <p><i>frailty</i>: tensions in educational purposes between instrumental, economic, <b>competitive</b> educational aims and intrinsic, cultural educational aims</p> <p><b>ideas of distributed leadership in the discourse</b></p> <p><i>strength</i>: valuing of distributed models of leadership</p> <p><i>frailty</i>: tendency to revert to familiar focus on positional and hierarchical leadership roles and seek 'great leaders'</p>
<b>Locus of control</b>	<p><b>policy intention to generate distributed development, dispersing the locus of control for leadership development</b></p> <p><i>strength</i>: benefits of innovation and variety</p> <p><i>frailty</i>: quality assurance and inequalities in opportunities for developing and nurturing agency and the capacity for autonomy</p>
<b>Relationship to the discipline</b> (the nature of leadership)	<p><b>relationship to the distributed nature of leadership</b></p> <p><i>strength</i>: basing leadership development on the actual distributed nature of leadership</p> <p><i>frailty</i>: basing leadership development on traditional notions of hierarchical leadership and 'great leaders'</p>
<b>Relationship to research</b>	<p><b>knowledge creation</b></p> <p><i>strength</i>: where scope for critical and questioning independent research and for research and enquiry by practitioners is high</p> <p><i>frailty</i>: where scope for critical and questioning independent research and for research and enquiry by practitioners is low</p>

**Table 1: Examples of strength and frailty in the systemic conditions for leadership development**