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PEDAGOGICAL AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A RECIPE FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC RESULTS

By Mathieu Bédard

Many factors can influence the academic results of secondary students, such as the quality of teaching, the training that teachers receive, and the pedagogical tools that teachers have at their disposal. Two factors that are less often considered are pedagogical autonomy and the accountability of teachers and school principals.

Pedagogical autonomy refers to the ability of teachers and school principals to decide for themselves what educational materials to use in their classrooms and their schools. Such autonomy allows schools to offer a variety of courses and programs, to innovate in terms of teaching methods, and to better adapt themselves to the specific needs of their students. It is opposed to the vision of a centralized educational system in which content and teaching methods are entirely determined by a Department of Education and are the same for everyone.

Making teachers and school principals accountable means that their performance can be compared to that of other teachers and other schools, and that they are rewarded or penalized based on these results. Teachers and principals are thereby incentivized to adjust their pedagogical methods in order to improve results.

According to numerous international studies, when these two principles are jointly applied, they become key factors in the achievement of good academic results in high school.[1] Together, they tap into what the founder of several schools in France calls an education in which "each principal and each teacher [is] able to give his best."[2]

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Levels of pedagogical autonomy vary tremendously from one country to another. The OECD's PISA[3] tests, carried out every three years, evaluate this autonomy, as well as 15-year-old students' abilities in basic subjects, across 65 countries. According to the most recent ranking, Japan, Thailand, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom are the places where teachers and school principals have the most

This *Economic Note* was prepared by **Mathieu Bédard**, Economist at the MEI. He holds a PhD in economics from Aix-Marseille University, and a master's degree in economic analysis of institutions from Paul Cézanne University.

pedagogical autonomy.[4] In Japan, for example, schools report that teachers and/or principals are free to choose:

- their student evaluation policies in 98% of cases;
- which textbooks and other books to use in 89% of cases;
- the content of courses in 89% of cases; and
- which courses are offered in their schools in 90% of cases.

This pedagogical autonomy differs markedly from what exists in the lowest-ranked countries, like Turkey and Greece. In this last country, only 29% of teachers and principals are free to choose how to evaluate students, 5% can choose their own textbooks, 2% can determine the content of courses, and 4% can decide for themselves which courses are offered.[5]

The difference matters, because international studies show that when teachers and school principals have more pedagogical autonomy, students generally achieve better grades, and these results remain valid even when standard of living variances are taken into account.[6] The trend line in Figure 1 illustrates the fact that autonomy is positively correlated with higher scores in international tests.

Certain conditions are necessary for pedagogical autonomy to lead to improvements in academic performance. First of all, the advantages of autonomy only materialize in systems that already achieve fairly good results,[7] as is the case in Canada. In countries starting off with inefficient school systems, like Peru, Indonesia, or Qatar, more autonomy would not necessarily improve things.

Such autonomy allows schools to offer a variety of courses and programs, to innovate, and to better adapt themselves to the specific needs of their students.

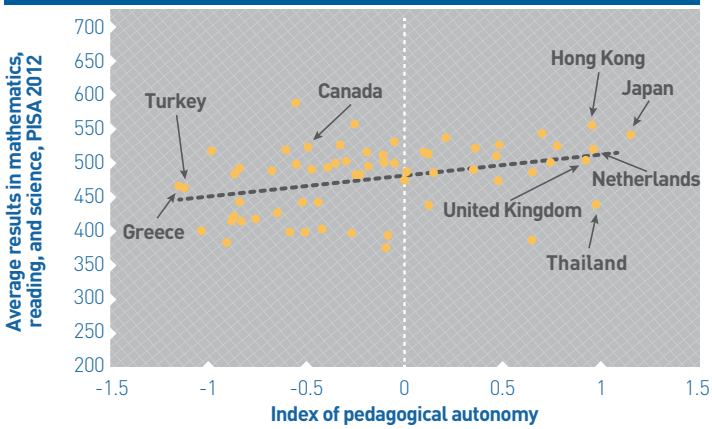
Teachers and school administrators must also be accountable for their decisions.[8] In less accountable school systems, additional pedagogical autonomy could actually harm students and lead to worse results if there is no way to penalize bad choices.

WHY IT WORKS

There are several ways of explaining this effect of pedagogical autonomy and accountability on academic performance. One explanation emphasizes the fact that teachers who are more

Figure 1

Link between pedagogical autonomy and academic results in 65 countries



Sources: OECD, *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful?* Vol. 4, 2013, PISA 2012 Data, Annex B1, Table IV.4.3; OECD, *PISA 2012 Results in Focus: What 15-Year-Olds Know and What They Can Do with What They Know*, 2014, p. 5.

autonomous in their work are also happier and quite simply more effective.[9]

Pedagogical autonomy also allows for a wider range of alternative models to be offered to students, who have different interests and aptitudes, and who learn in different ways. The talents of different students are more likely to be uncovered thanks to the various intensive programs offered in private and public schools such as sports, arts, sciences, international education, etc. This choice extends to institutions themselves, thanks to the existence of alternative schools, Waldorf or Montessori schools, single-sex schools, religious schools, and others.

This diversity presupposes a humble attitude when it comes to what one believes constitutes a good education, and therefore allows for the happy surprises that can result from educational innovation. When errors occur and less effective pedagogical methods are adopted, as sometimes happens in any educational system, the failure thus remains limited to the classes and schools having adopted those methods, instead of affecting all students throughout the system. Moreover, teachers can readjust their pedagogical strategies and techniques without government authorization and, because they are accountable, they even have an incentive to do so. The consequences of pedagogical errors are therefore reduced, both in scope and duration.

PEDAGOGICAL AUTONOMY IN CANADA AND QUEBEC

Canadian students do well in international tests, with results above the OECD average in learning assessments. Among 65 countries, Canada ranks 14th in mathematics, 10th in science, and 8th in reading.[10] Quebec pulls the country's average up when it comes to mathematics instruction, where it achieves results equivalent to the 7th place country. It is the only province to be above the Canadian average in all aspects of mathematical learning assessment. The results of Quebec students are equivalent to the Canadian average in reading, whereas they are below the average in science.[11]

Canada ranks just 42nd out of 65 countries, however, in terms of pedagogical autonomy, below the OECD average. Only 25% of principals and teachers choose their own student evaluation methods, 44% choose their own textbooks, 19% choose the content of their courses, and 46% decide for themselves which courses are offered.[12]

Quebec is the province with the highest degree of pedagogical autonomy, even though it remains a little lower than the OECD average, as shown in Figure 2. Not only does Quebec have the largest proportion of students registered in private schools,[13] which enjoy a decent amount of pedagogical autonomy, but the province's public schools also enjoy greater autonomy.

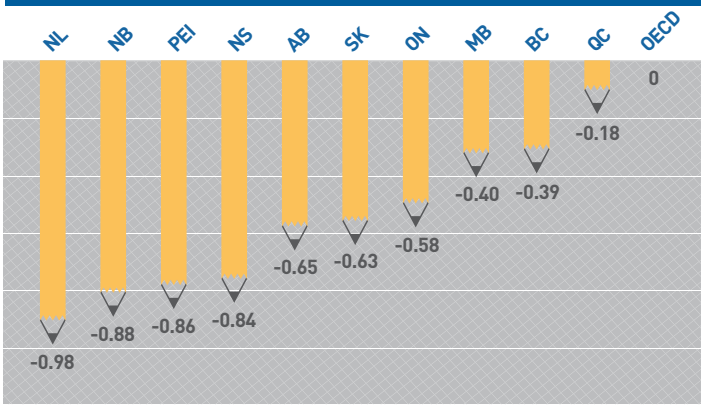
According to the OECD, Quebec's educational system is first in Canada both when it comes to pedagogical autonomy and to results in mathematics, whereas that of Newfoundland and Labrador is dead last in terms of autonomy and second to last in math. Manitoba's educational system occupies a middling position according to both measures, in third place for pedagogical autonomy and eighth place for student results.[14] The mathematical performance of students in these three provinces can be explained among other things by the degree of pedagogical autonomy.

Quebec and the other Canadian provinces have educational systems that exhibit certain of the foundations required for proper accountability. They are transparent, and it is possible to compare their performance in terms of students' grades and graduation rates, although such comparisons are not readily available. They can, for example, be made using the *Report Card on Quebec's Secondary Schools*[15] and standardized tests.[16] Teachers are also held accountable by Departments of Education when their effectiveness is evaluated by supervisors who sit in on their classes. Sometimes this accountability can come from the schools themselves, for example through student evaluations of the quality of their education.

When teachers and school principals have more pedagogical autonomy, students generally achieve better grades.

Figure 2

Differences in pedagogical autonomy compared to the OECD average, PISA 2012



Sources: OECD, *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful?* Vol. 4, 2013, PISA 2012 Data, Annex B2, Table B2.IV.16.

On the other hand, at least in Quebec, teachers and principals do not experience any direct consequences from these comparisons. There is little in the way of merit pay,[17] it is practically impossible to dismiss teachers for reasons of incompetence, and competition among public schools in limited by the matching of students with their closest public school. The successes of teachers and principals are therefore not rewarded monetarily, nor by increased requests to register.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Given that Quebec and the rest of Canada already achieve good results and have systems in which certain foundations of accountability are already present, international studies suggest that greater pedagogical autonomy and accountability would be of benefit for Canadian students.

Indeed, there are still some major bureaucratic obstacles to pedagogical autonomy. In Quebec, for instance, in many cases, particular programs must be limited to a fraction of the

student body, with exceptions requiring authorization from the Minister.[18] Whereas international studies recommend making teachers accountable and allowing innovation without having to ask permission, Quebec's Department of Education chooses the path of prior approval.

Of course, even in a school system that relies on autonomy and accountability, the government finances schools and must therefore ensure the proper use of funds, the establishment of minimal standards, and the setting and achievement of certain objectives. Ways must be found to combine accountability and autonomy intelligently, without allowing these minimal standards to get in the way.

This diversity presupposes a humble attitude when it comes to what one believes constitutes a good education, and therefore allows for the happy surprises that can result from innovation.

The following avenues of reform would allow us to derive greater benefits from autonomy in terms of innovation:

1. The minimal standards imposed by governments should be sufficiently open and neutral to allow them to be applied within different kinds of pedagogical systems.

2. These minimal standards should not dictate a particular method, but rather the general results to be obtained. The formulation of these general results must be abstract enough so as not to promote any particular method or particular course content, without opening the door to abuses.

3. The system should be open to external observers other than government observers, to include universities and other civil society organizations with the ability to certify the validity and quality of educational programs.

CONCLUSION

Both international and Canadian experience show that academic results can be improved through greater pedagogical autonomy. To enjoy the benefits of this autonomy, the environment in which teachers and school principals evolve must allow them enough latitude to experiment, all while penalizing or rewarding them for the consequences of their decisions. This implies changes that would cost the government nothing, but that would entail better academic results and allow education to be better adapted to the diversity of students' needs and aptitudes.

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