International Journal of Educational Development 62 (2018) 289–301

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Are teachers losing control of the classroom? Global changes in school governance and teacher responsibilities, 2000–2015

Dong Wook Jeong[a,1], Thomas F. Luschei[b,*]

[a] Department of Education, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro Gwanak-gu, Seoul, 08826, Room 11-434, Republic of Korea
[b] School of Educational Studies, Claremont Graduate University, 150 E 10th St., Claremont, CA 91711, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Teacher autonomy
Decentralization
School governance
PISA
Cross-national studies

ABSTRACT

Despite frequent calls for greater teacher autonomy, governments across the globe have increasingly shifted decision-making away from the classroom. In this study, we use cross-national data from the Programme for International Student Assessment to examine changes in decision-making responsibilities across 33 countries from 2000 to 2015. We find that in most countries, teachers have lost decision-making authority, while governments and school leaders have gained authority. We also find that gains in government authority have a negative impact on teachers' level of responsibility, especially in the domain of curriculum and instruction. These changes pose a threat to teachers' professionalism and autonomy.

1. Introduction

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a global surge in calls for teacher professionalization, including the establishment of standards for teaching, stronger recruitment and training of teachers, better compensation, and more autonomy in classroom and school decision-making. In the United States, a pair of influential reports argued that teachers should be prepared and compensated as professionals who know their craft well and can execute it expertly in the classroom (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future NCTAF, 1996, 1997). A similar trend occurred across Europe, beginning with Finland in the 1980s and continuing well into the 2000s (Eurydice, 2008). This call for teacher professionalization and autonomy was bolstered by the stellar performance of Finland on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a cross-national assessment of student performance first administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2000. Finland's superior performance was largely attributed to a "culture of trust" in which teachers were well trained, well compensated, and empowered to act as autonomous professionals in their classrooms and schools (Sahlberg, 2007).

In many European countries, the move toward teacher autonomy was accompanied and reinforced by decentralization of educational governance, in which teachers gained increasing responsibility over not just curriculum and instruction, but also school wide decisions related to budgeting, staffing, and planning (Eurydice, 2008). But this trend toward decentralization was not universal, as several European countries moved toward centralization in the form of standards-based accountability or the establishment of national frameworks to guide teachers' work, which acted to constrain teachers' classroom autonomy (Eurydice, 2008). In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 increased the federal role in decision-making and put schools and districts on watch for their performance on standardized tests. On its face, NCLB also supported teacher professionalization through its call for qualified teachers in every classroom. According to some accounts, however, encroaching government control over schools, in the form of high-stakes exams and scripted curricula, constrained teachers' flexibility and autonomy in the classroom (e.g., Barrett, 2009). According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2003 and 2012, the percentage of US teachers who perceived low autonomy in instruction and planning in the classroom increased, while the percentage of teachers reporting high autonomy decreased (Sparks and Malkus, 2015).

Although educational research in the United States has devoted considerable attention to the increasing influence of the federal government since the passage of NCLB, evidence regarding the impact of NCLB on teacher autonomy is mixed (Grissom et al., 2014). Additionally, there has been little cross-national research examining the impact of trends in educational governance on teacher autonomy. Whereas some countries are engaged in long-term decentralization, others appear to be enacting a type of "neo-centralization" that strips

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jeongdw@snu.ac.kr (D.W. Jeong), thomas.luschei@cgu.edu (T.F. Luschei).
[1] This work was supported by "Overseas Training Expenses for Humanities & Social Sciences" through Seoul National University (SNU).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.07.004
Received 31 January 2018; Received in revised form 4 June 2018; Accepted 7 July 2018

classroom control away from teachers. The objective of this study is to discern whether there has been a global trend in either educational centralization or decentralization; if so, what has been the impact of this trend on school-level decision making of teachers and principals?

Whereas the theory of the "zero-sum-game" posits that an increase in one actor's authority necessarily reduces the authority of other actors, success in the educational endeavor requires collaboration across many actors, suggesting the possibility of complementarities in the decision-making authority of governments, school principals, and teachers (Shen and Xia, 2012; Xia, 2014). In this study, we use cross-national data from 33 countries and education systems participating in the 2000 and 2015 PISA assessments to examine global trends in educational governance and to assess the impact of these trends on teacher and principal decision-making authority.[2] Specifically, we explore the following research questions:

1 Across 33 countries, how did school-level decision-making responsibilities change from 2000 to 2015 overall and in the areas of staffing, budgeting, and curriculum and instruction?
2 From 2000–2015, how did changes in government responsibilities affect teachers' and principals' responsibilities overall and in the areas of staffing, budgeting, and curriculum and instruction?

In the section that follows we briefly review literature related to teacher autonomy and educational governance. We then describe our data and methodological approach, followed by a description of our results. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study for policy and research, followed by a call for further cross-national research related to teacher autonomy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher professionalism and autonomy

In 1996 the US National Commission on Teaching and America's Future issued a report that articulated a vision of teacher professionalism based on three premises:

(1) What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn;
(2) Recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers is the central strategy for improving our schools;
(3) School reform cannot succeed unless it focuses on creating the conditions in which teachers can teach, and teach well (NCTAF, 2006, p. 10).

Implicit in the NCTAF's vision and accompanying recommendations was the idea that teachers understand the needs of their students and should be empowered to make key curricular and instructional decisions to ensure student success. In other words, teacher professionalism demands that teachers have autonomy in the classroom (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996), while diminished teacher autonomy contributes to the deprofessionalization of teachers (Evans, 2011; MacBeath, 2012).

Teacher autonomy is a constantly evolving concept that encompasses a range of conceptualizations and dimensions (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005), including work autonomy (MacBeath, 2012), professional autonomy (Pitt, 2010), engaged autonomy (Gabriel et al., 2011), responsibility autonomy (Hoyle and John, 1995), regulated autonomy (Dale, 1982), and occupational autonomy (Berry, 2012), among others. Although there is no definitive measure of autonomy, Pearson and Hall (1993) highlight the importance of teachers' perceptions in defining and assessing autonomy. More generally, researchers have operationalized teacher autonomy as teacher's perceptions related to their control over professional activities in their classrooms (e.g., Ingersoll and May, 2012; Sparks and Malkus, 2015).

Teacher autonomy is important for a number of reasons. First, it plays a central role in building and sustaining teacher motivation and job satisfaction, which in turn influence teacher retention (Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2006; Khmelkov, 2000; Smithers and Robinson, 2003). Autonomy may also play an outsized role in retaining teachers with expertise in mathematics; in a longitudinal study of math and science teachers in the United States, Ingersoll and May (2012) found that the degree of classroom autonomy in a school as perceived by teachers was the strongest determinant of retention among math teachers, even stronger than the impact of salaries.

Ingersoll (1997) also suggests that increasing teacher autonomy can help to improve educational standards and decision making, as decisions driven by those responsible for their implementation are often better informed and more likely to succeed. Granting of autonomy and empowering teachers have also been identified as appropriate starting points for solving school wide problems (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994), suggesting that teacher autonomy can extend beyond the classroom into other school-based decisions such as staffing and budgeting. However, greater involvement in school wide decision-making may reduce teachers' ability to perform effectively in the classroom, as competing priorities and responsibilities divert their attention from the central task of teaching students (Eurydice, 2008).

2.2. Educational governance and teacher autonomy

In many cases, teacher professionalization has accompanied a global wave of educational decentralization that is based on the idea that local governments can legitimately and efficiently secure accountability and responsiveness because of their local information and knowledge (Oates, 1972, 1999). In contrast, as economist Milton Friedman argued, the uniform and unilateral provision of schooling through a centralized education system results in lower-quality and inefficient provision of educational services (Friedman, 1962). As a result of these perceived advantages, educational decentralization has been an essential part of education reforms designed to increase efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness in developed and developing countries alike (Hannaway and Carnoy, 1993).

Although there are different types and degrees of educational decentralization, the basic definition involves the transfer of decision-making authority from higher levels of government to lower organizational levels, including local governments or individual schools (Brown, 1994). A large body of literature on decentralization may be divided into two types based on to whom authority is transferred, local governments or individual schools. The latter type of decentralization is sometimes referred to as school decentralization, school autonomy, or "school-based management" (SBM) (Caldwell, 2005). According to Malen et al. (1990), "school-based management can be viewed conceptually as a formal alteration of governance structures, as a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority as the primary means through which improvement might be stimulated and sustained" (p. 290).

By definition, decentralization or school-based management naturally involves a greater decision-making role for teachers. As education systems across Europe decentralized in the 1990s and early 2000s, teachers often found themselves with greater autonomy over not just classroom-level decisions, but also with greater responsibilities for school wide decisions related to planning, budgeting, and staffing (Eurydice, 2008). These increasing responsibilities raised concern that teachers were being distracted from their core task of teaching students. Ironically, some of the same concerns emerged in reaction to NCLB Era

[2] Not all of the 33 participating education systems are technically countries, as Belgium's participation in PISA is limited to the Flemish-speaking part of that country. However, for convenience we refer to all 33 participants as "countries."