SEAMEO CENTRES POLICY RESEARCH NETWORK (CPRN) SUMMIT 2025

Building Bridges to a Sustainable Future: Inclusive Collaboration and Innovation in Education, Science, and Culture

Balancing autonomy and accountability: Insights from English Free Schools for Southeast Asia

Dr. Louise Pagden, CfBT, Brunei

HOSTED BY
SEAMEO VOCTECH Regional Centre, Brunei Darussalam

SUPPORTED BY
Ministry of Education Brunei Darussalam
Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation
CfBT Education Services
german cooperation
Implemented by giz
RECOTwin

IN CONJUNCTION WITH
Brunei MYCE 2025

Outline

- Brief introduction to UK school system
- Free schools – balancing autonomy and accountability
- Methodology
- Case study schools
- Key findings and discussion
- Insights for Southeast Asia

Introduction to England's schools

School Type	Number of Schools (approx.)	Percentage of Total Schools	Notes
Total Schools in England	*24,479*	*100%*	*Includes all state-funded and independent schools*
Local Authority Maintained	~13,800	~56.5%	Schools funded and controlled by local authorities
Academies (total)	~10,770	~44.0%	Includes converter, sponsored, and free schools; increased by 5.25% from 2023 (10,233)
Independent (Private) Schools	~2,400	~9.8%	Privately funded, outside state system

Free schools: balance of autonomy and accountability

Michael Gove's rationale: Gove 2010b, in Hope 2012, p90.

...it is by freeing school leaders from bureaucracy that we give them more space to innovate, to excel, and by excelling, to inspire others. ... it's because I want to see more diversity, more creativity, more professional freedom - that I want to extend autonomy.

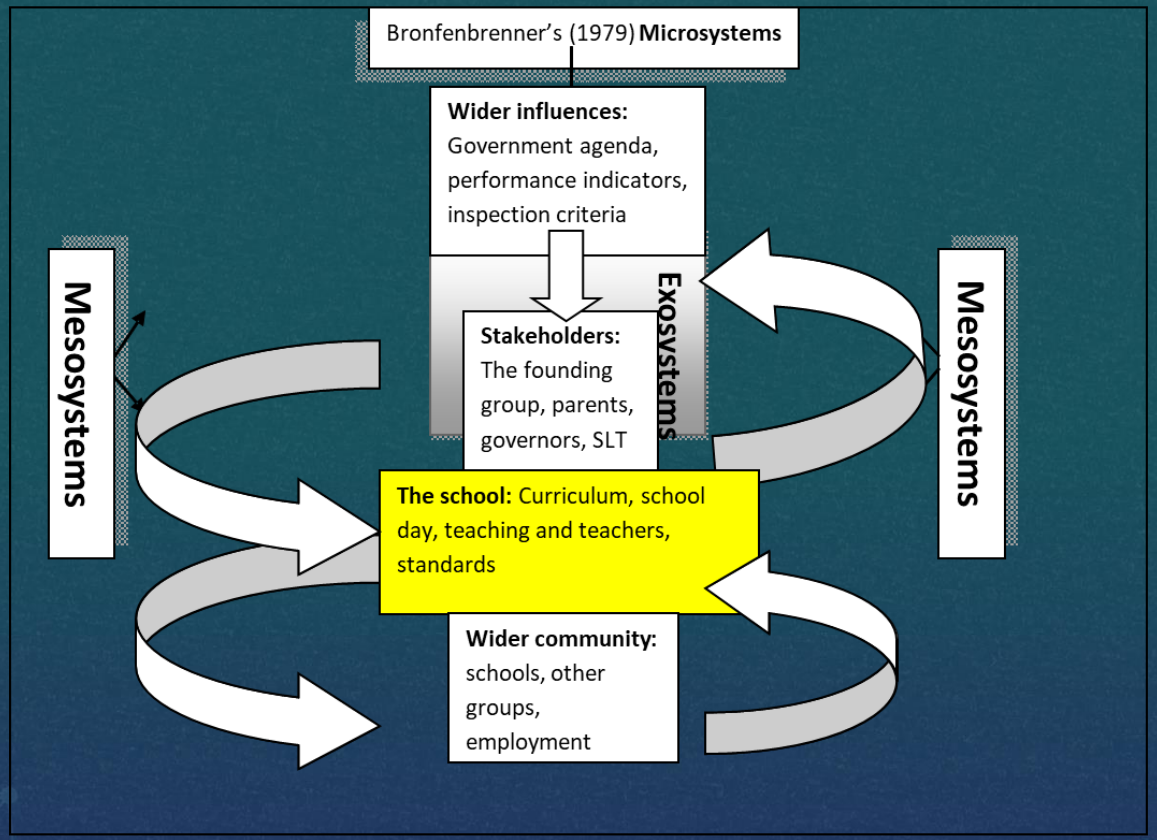
Comparative table for school performance

School Type	KS2: % Meeting Expected Standard (R+W+M)	KS4: % Grade 5+ English & Maths	Attainment 8 / Progress 8	Ofsted: % Good/Outstanding (2023)
LA-Maintained	2022: 60% ▪ 2023: 60% ▪ 2024: 61%	~42%	A8: ~48 ▪ P8: ~–0.05 to 0.00	**93%** Good/Outstanding (The Guardian, 2023)
Academies (inc. MATs)	2022–24: ~60–61%	~43–45%	A8: ~48–49 ▪ P8: ~0.00 to +0.10	**87%** Good/Outstanding (The Guardian, 2023)
Free Schools	2022–24: ~62–64% (above state avg.)	~50–60% in top performers	A8: ~50+ ▪ P8: often +0.3 to +1.0 **(e.g., Michaela)**	Treated as academies – included in academy stats
Private (Independent)	Not included in DfE KS2 data; typically >70%	~60–65%	A8: ~52+ (indicative only) P8: Not applicable	Not inspected by Ofsted; use ISI instead

Research methodology

Epistemology	Approach	Methods	Analysis
interpretivist	Qualitative	National policy	Grounded theory And thematic coding
Constructivist	Case study	Semi-structured interview	Axial coding
		Documentary analysis	

Networked ecosystem model

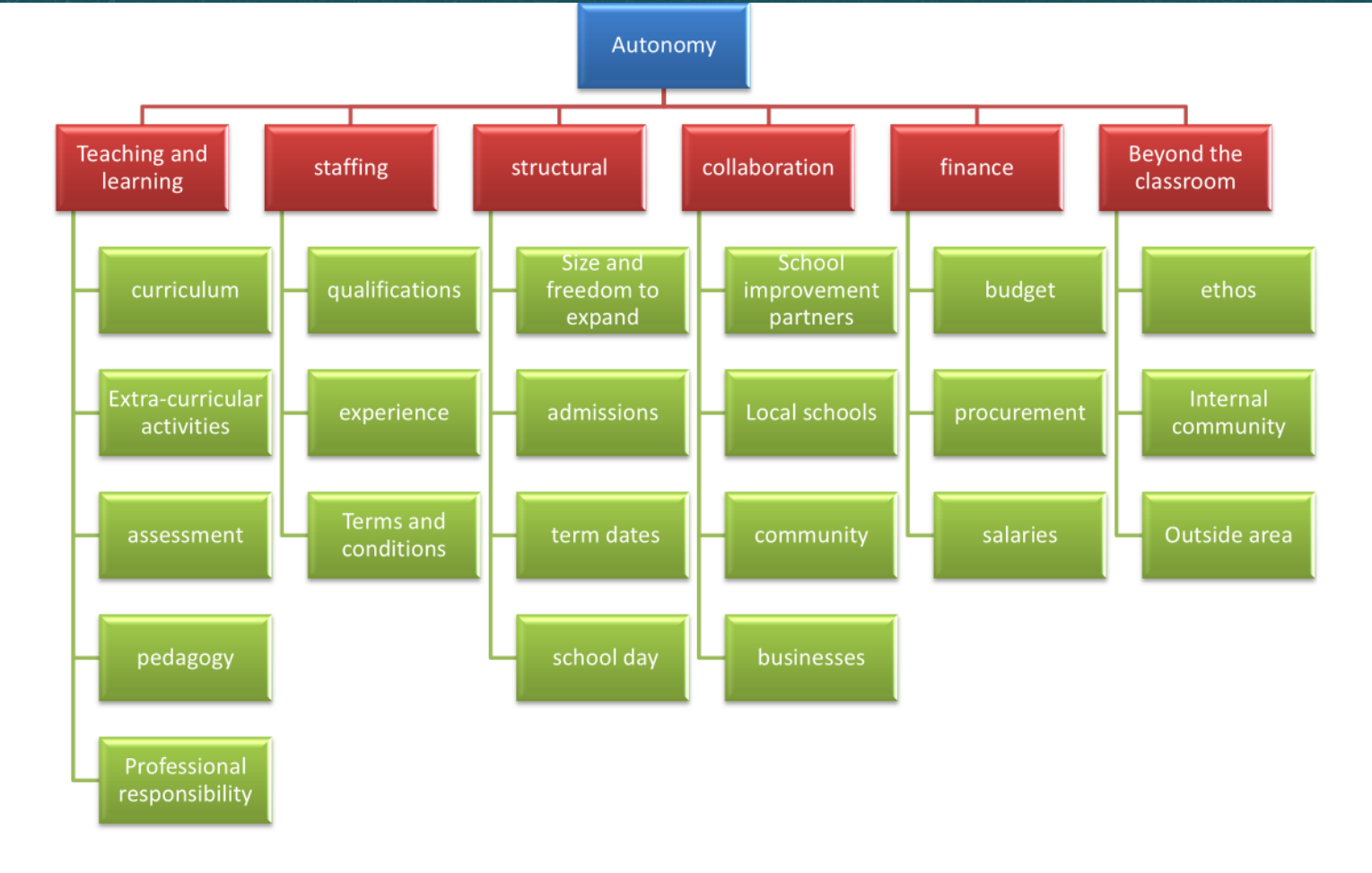


Case studies

	School A	School B
Proposer	Church consortia and MAT academy sponsor	Parent-proposer group (and MAT academy initially)
Motivation	Lack of school places; Serve community and address social disadvantage Poor education provision (bottom of the league tables for writing)	Self-motivated Local school place for child
Expertise	High degree of social capital in area	Able to draw on faith networks for expertise
Curriculum	Traditional Focus on STEM	traditional
Deprivation indices	Top 10% deprivation	Bottom 5%
DfE Impact assessment	Moderate threat to six local schools due to Ofsted grading or poor SATs results	Moderate threat to one school due to surplus entry places

Findings and discussion

'Negotiated Autonomy' in practice



- Schools used autonomy **cautiously**
- Community expectations and regulations influenced decision-making

Accountability Mechanisms

Compliance culture: Inspection and performance monitoring.

- Accountability first, autonomy second.
- Accountability mechanisms act as ‘gates’ schools must pass to earn trust and freedom to innovate (Barber, 2007).
- Leaders often feel pressure to conform (Dahler-Larsen, 2012).

Market accountability

- Viability depended on attracting sufficient students; undersubscription risked financial difficulties or closure
- linking autonomy to market logic (Leeder and Mabbett, 2011, p.135).

School Performance and Equity

- Affluent areas may benefit more from school choice.
- **Equity risks remain** in under-resourced contexts (Galiani et al., 2008).
- Autonomy enabled schools to recruit motivated staff and tailor strategies to student needs while accountability pressures ensured a strong focus on core outcomes like literacy and numeracy (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2013).
- School autonomy, when combined with robust accountability, is associated with improved student achievement (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2013).

Insights for Southeast Asia

Build Capacity for Autonomy e.g. Malaysia and Philippines

Balanced and Comprehensive Accountability e.g. rural schools (Unicef, 2018)

Contextualise Autonomy Policies e.g. Vietnam

Phase in accountability measures appropriately e.g. Indonesia

Safeguard Equity and Inclusion: e.g. Indonesia

Leverage Networks and Collaboration e.g. Malaysia and Philippines

Summary

Empower schools to be responsive and creative, but anchor freedom in a framework of support, oversight and shared goals.
(Buerger et al. 2023; Ang et al. 2025).

References (Full references on paper)

- Ang, J.V., Adlit, M.F., Docdoc, V.A., Comeros, J.S. & Lagnason-Pacheco, L., 2025. *School-based management implementation and educational outcomes in Philippine public schools: An explanatory sequential inquiry*. **Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology**, 9(4), pp.2625–2644.
- Banfield-Nwachi, M (2023)'Council maintained schools in England outperforming academies in Ofsted ratings. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/03/council-maintained-schools-in-england-outperforming-academies-in-ofsted-ratings [accessed 02.06.25]
- Barber, M. and Mourshed, M.(2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come out on Top*. The Free Press.
- Buerger, C.), J., and Mata, C. (2023) How Context Shapes the Relationship between School Autonomy and Test-Scores: An Explanatory Analysis using PISA 2015. EdWorkingPaper No 23-741. How Context Shapes the Relationship between School Autonomy and Test-Scores: An Explanatory Analysis using PISA 2015 [accessed07.06.25]
- Dahler-Larsen, P (2012) *The Evaluation Society.* Stanford University Press.
- Galiani, S. Gertler, P. Schargrodsky, E. (2008) 'School decentralization: Helping the good get better, but leaving the poor behind' *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 92, Issues 10–11
- Hanushek, E.A., Link, S. and Woessmann, L. (2013) 'Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA', *Journal of Development Economics*, 104, pp. 212–232Hope, M.A. (2012) 'Youth work and state education — Should youth workers apply to set up a Free School?' *Youth and Policy*, 109, 60–70.
- Leeder, A. and Mabbett, D. (2011) 'Free Schools: Big Society or Small Interests?' The Political *Quarterly.* Volume82, Issues1 September 2011 Pages 133-144
- Unicef (2018) *SUMMARY OF UNICEF'S 2018 EDUCATION RESULTS*. Accessed at: file