

# Mauritius: Centralization or Decentralization? What Path to Take?

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**Abstract:** *In this article, we are going to analyse the advantages and limitations of centralization and decentralization of the educational system. We shall trace the move from a centralized to a decentralized system in society. Our main interest is to find out how education moved from a decentralized system to a centralized system, and what made it possible to go back to decentralization. What are the advantages of this move?*

**Keywords:** Centralization, Decentralization, Hierarchy, Efficiency, Bureaucracy.

## 1) The Move towards Centralization

Throughout the world, the desire to control at the top has always been there. In the field of education, except for a few countries - the Scandinavian countries, US, UK, and some others, power is exerted by those at the top.

Ever since society started to be built, there have been some people possessing more intelligence, skills that have naturally moved to the top. They are people who may be called elites. They have become leaders, and the rest of society, followers. They have monopolised power, controlling every aspect of society, dictating how society should be organised, and preventing anyone from diverging. As time went by, the elites transmitted their skills to their descendants. Power has always stayed in the hands of one particular group of people. This is called Centralization of power, authority.

(Centralization and Decentralization: encyclopedia. com)

## 2) What is Centralization?

Centralisation happens when authority and decision - making are concentrated at the top of the hierarchy of an organisation. All decisions are controlled at one central place. According to Allen,

*“Centralization is the systematic and consistent reservation of authority at central points in the organisation”.*

It is the top management which takes decision in a company. Those who are at the lower levels are closely supervised by the top of the hierarchy.

Fayol, (1905) said: *“Everything that goes to increase the importance of the subordinate’s role is decentralization; everything which goes to reduce it is centralization.”*

Centralization and decentralization are two modes of working in an organisation. In centralization, there is a hierarchy of formal authority for making all the important decisions. In decentralization, decision - making is shared with the lower levels.

## 3) Decentralization

Decentralization is a systematic delegation of authority at all levels. Major decisions are reserved by the top authority. But the rest is delegated. The degree of decentralization will depend upon the amount of authority delegated. According to Allen: *“Decentralisation refers to the systematic effort to*

*delegate to the lowest level of authority, except that which can be controlled and exercised at central points”.* It is said that when the role of subordinates is increased, it is decentralization and what decreases their role is centralization.

## 4) What Are The Implications?

- a) The CEO is less burdened.
- b) Subordinates have greater freedom to exert their talents. They are able to develop skills and capabilities.
- c) Decentralization gives more scope to employees, and work becomes more effective.
- d) Employees are more motivated and the morale is greater as they are given more independence to decide.

## 5) Advantages of Centralization

- a) In a centralized system, there is uniformity of procedures and policies.
- b) The potential of employees, especially those who are outstanding, can be used in a better way.
- c) The activities of the organisation can be better controlled.
- d) The leader has entire authority and can take quick and correct decisions essential for the success of the enterprise.
- e) There is uniformity in decisions taken.
- f) There is greater harmony and move towards common objectives.
- g) When there is an urgent need to take decisions to protect the company, a central system is in a better position to act quickly to meet the problems.
- h) Centralization avoids duplication of work and efforts.
- i) Centralization improves performance.
- j) Centralization helps to harmonise move towards common objectives.
- k) There is greater opportunity for leadership.

## 6) Limitations of Centralization.

- a) Centralization demotivates the staff.
- b) It favours autocratic leadership.
- c) Too much power given to one person may result in misuse of authority.
- d) Since decisions are taken only at the top, and since those at the top are burdened by work, decision - making can take quite a long time to the detriment of the organisation.
- e) Lower managers do not have the opportunity of taking decisions. So they fail to become skilled.

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- f) Those at the lower level do not have the motivation because they feel they are not part of the organisation.
- g) There is uniformity in decisions taken.
- h) There is greater harmony and move towards common objectives.

### 7) Centralization versus Decentralization

No organisation can say that it is exclusively centralized or decentralized. There is no organisation where decisions are taken by one person only. So also, there is no organisation where authority is delegated to all members of the staff.

What type of organisation is put into place depends on the size, importance of a company, nature of services provided, location of markets, and availability of efficient managers.

When there is centralization, the central management must plan, organise, coordinate, and control the activities of the different departments. Skilled and capable persons must be trained to become middle - level managers. And so, there should be a policy of formation. There will be need for coordination among different departments. Effective control is important.

Top management should be willing to share authority.

Middle managers must be willing to accept new responsibilities.

Structures should be modified to facilitate decentralized operation.

### 8) The Move towards Decentralization.

Before society started being organised, small villages dotted the country. Communication was poor. Each village, each little agglomeration organised its administration independently from others. With development, with urbanisation, the population moved automatically towards centralization.

According to Max Weber (1905), bureaucracy is the most efficient way to set up an organisation, an administration. For Weber, bureaucracy is better than traditional structures because everyone can be treated as equal and the division of labour is clearly described for each employee. According to Max Weber, *"bureaucracy is an organisational structure that is characterised by many roles, standardised processes, procedures and requirements, number of desks, meticulous division of labour and responsibility clear hierarchies and professional, almost impersonal interactions between employees"*.

In a bureaucratic organisation, regulations are made and have to be complied with. (Jacques 1976). A bureaucratic organisation does not serve individuals but serve society above all (Olson, 1965).

In a bureaucratic organisation there are hierarchical layers of authority.

The term bureaucracy has had a negative connotation. But it has played a consistent role to deliver consistent output.

At the same time it has been found that bureaucracy engenders red tape, paper work, slow, communication, with employees feeling distanced from the organisation and this prevents employees to be innovative. Employees would like to have a voice in making decisions.

A well - known leader who perfected the centralization and bureaucratisation of the administrative system was Napoleon Bonaparte. By nominating prefects and mayors, instead of having them elected, Napoleon ensured that the whole country was controlled by the Central Government. France, under Napoleon, became a model of centralization and bureaucracy. It has stayed so until now, although, most developed countries are moving towards a decentralized system. Such a state of affair has brought important disorganisation to the French Society. People feel that their views are not considered. And so, they refuse to participate in the electoral system of the country. Recent elections have shown massive abstention. The demands of people are expressed in the streets through protests, often violent. It is important to give to the people greater say in the affairs of the country.

### 9) Education: Centralization and Decentralization

Countries across the world have adopted different models to structure and organise their educational systems, as well as new approaches and processes in their management. The organisational structures of the Central Ministry of Education, the degree of administrative decentralization and institutional autonomy vary from country to country. (UNESCO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING, IIEP, Advance Training Program, 2017 - 2018).

As other institutions, education started to be organised in a decentralized system. In fact, education was not an institution at the beginning. A few elite gave education to their children at home, because they had ample time to do so. But, when the society started to become more sophisticated, parents no more had time to impart education to their children. Schools had to be organised where children could go to. Teachers had to be employed. And schooling became a bureaucratic organisation as from the nineteenth century. Again, we find the name of Napoleon Bonaparte. He was quite interested in the development of education, and his views had a quite great impact on how education was organised. Naturally, his policy was centralisation. Creating central schools was his top priority. He established a central control of the educational system. As he said, he wanted to cast a whole generation in the same mould. Napoleon boasted that, at any time of the day and any time of the year, he could say exactly what was being taught in the classes of France. This is absolutely absurd, dementia, and cannot succeed. Yet, the majority of nations, until now, believe in what the French assert strongly as *"Le pouvoir regalien, Jupiterien,"* that is, absolute control from the top.

### 10) Advantages of Educational Centralization.

As we have already seen, centralization has quite a number of advantages. There is no doubt that the school system of many countries has reached the top and is the envy of others because of centralization. This centralized system offers higher quality of instructions and greater efficiency and

effectiveness (Guthrie and Reed, 1986). We have examples of France, Sweden where the system is highly centralized and is an example for other countries. A centralized system makes it possible to pool together resources. Developing countries, where there is a lack of expertise, centralization impacts favourably on the development of education. In a centralized system, employees are faced with a clear chain of command. Everyone knows exactly to whom he/she should report.

Vision can be focused. Everyone knows what is the aim and moves towards its fulfilment. Branches are not needed, and so, there is reduction of costs.

Decisions are centralised in the hands of a few. So, they are quickly implemented. At the same time, there is little conflict.

The quality of work is improved with better supervision. The leader is given entire authority, and so, can make quick decisions and solve problems quickly.

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Centralization brings uniformity of procedures and policies.

#### 11) Disadvantages of Educational Centralization.

As in all centralized systems, leadership is bureaucratic. As time goes by, the leadership becomes dictatorial. No employee is given the opportunity of participating. Their only job is to implement decisions taken at the top. And so, motivation fades out which results in a decline of performance.

If an institution is to perform, it has to be controlled. With centralization, the top management is far away from employees, and, it is overburdened with work. So, there is less supervision. The end result is poor implementation.

There is much delay in realising decisions. It is not that employees are lazy. It is only because decisions come from the top. And, it takes time to relay these decisions because of lack of direct communication. And guidance is not at the place of work.

All these defects bring a decrease in employees' loyalty. There is no motivation. Employees are not encouraged to take initiative, and so, there is no creativity.

A centralized system creates a problematic situation. The bureaucracy at the top does not possess the knowledge of the needs of the school and of the students. Because they are operating in a place distant from schools, they are not aware of the problems faced by schools. They do not know how to cope with them. Efficient schools need speedy decisions. Bureaucracy prevents the smooth flow of the institution.

#### 12) Advantages of a Decentralized System of Education.

More and more countries are becoming aware of the limitations of the centralization of the educational system.

A decentralized education system is one which devolves school management to lower levels of government.

Decentralization has a number of advantages. Decentralization brings greater efficiency and accountability. It brings transparency to the organisation, is better responsive to their needs, reflects local priorities, encourages participation, improves quality, and so, teaching and learning. Resources can be most effectively used. Bureaucracy is reduced. The potential for innovation is increased.

Decentralization has the power to bring decision - making closer to the people. Decision - making becomes more relevant through knowledge of local needs, and, there is greater accountability. All this improves the quality of education (Oates, 1972).

When decision - making is given to professionals, performance is improved. Goodlad (1983) advocated school autonomy in order to bring better performance. For him, "*The principal should be the captain of the ship*", and work with the whole staff to realise the vision of the school. For Darlington - Hammond and Wise (1984), democratisation will bring the participation of teachers and greater improvement through their professionalism and empowerment. According to Burbules (1986), power has to be shared. The system should be made less bureaucratic. This will not be possible in a hierarchical organisation, according to Foster (1986).

#### 13) School Institution: From Centralization to Decentralization.

In the seventeenth century, the institution of education was organised locally. There was no central authority (Cremin, 1980). The communities were small and scattered throughout the country. Each community controlled the schools found in its area (Peterson, 1985). But, in the nineteenth century, bureaucracy started extending its powers. With centralization, it was possible for the administrators who had been trained, to lead schools (Cubberley, 1927). As from the 1960s, many educators started to contest the benefits of centralization (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). With the development in technology, changes started accelerating (Rogers, 1982). Bureaucracy was unable to face and cope with changes. The community was flexible enough to face and solve problems (Fantinni and Gittel, 1971). There was need to be accountable and responsive (Hart, 1972), to bring decision - making and service delivery closer to local needs, to bring greater democracy and greater trust in government. Teachers, through autonomy found themselves closer to learners and their needs, and to deal with the diversity found, nowadays, in schools. Decentralization was a better weapon to face change (liberman, 1989).

#### 14) Some limitations of a Decentralized System.

No system brings only advantages. There are also limitations which have to be considered. In a decentralized education system, lack of uniformity may arise. Conflicts may arise through lack of coordination. Without a central authority, there may result a lack of trained personnel. With decentralization, finance will become a greater burden on the institution. Decentralization may bring a problem of coordination, each community having its own policy. The

cost of operating a decentralized system of education may be high.

According to Fayol, there needs to be an appropriate harmony between centralization and decentralization. An institution must not be totally unified or decentralized. There ought to be a match between the two. A legitimate blend of the two is required.

### 15) Mauritius: Centralization or Decentralization: What Path?

Mauritius, as many countries, continues weighing the pros and cons of both systems, and hesitates to take a definite path. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

As many Third World Countries, Mauritius has opted for a centralized system. In fact, it has inherited a system from the British Colonial days which ruled the country for one and a half centuries. Mauritius is a tiny country of 720 kilometres, with a much diversified population made up of people coming from Europe, Africa, Asia. The country needs to be unified and this can be achieved through centralization and a unified curriculum. Small communities do not have enough money to finance education.

Centralization of education has been sacralised in the Constitution of Mauritius which gives all powers to the Minister to organise education, and total control of all schools. This has been strengthened by the Educational Act of 1957, and the Education (Amendment) Ordinance of 1960. A scheme of work has been established which describes what is allowed and what is prohibited. The principal of the school is put into a mould from which he cannot escape. He receives directives which he has to communicate to teachers and put into practice. But, he is not allowed to take initiatives. In these circumstances, his development is limited. He can become very efficient up to a certain extent. Within the field of his power, Mauritian principles are quite efficient. But, they cannot jump the last step which would project them into the field of visionary leadership.

In order to find out what are the views and feelings of principals and teachers on decentralization, a survey was carried out in ten secondary schools. Ten principals and ten teachers were interviewed for one hour each. The aim was to find out what principals and teachers feel about centralization and decentralization. The interviewees were submitted to a battery of questions to find out whether centralization or decentralization was better for the schools of Mauritius, whether they were aware of the concept of Distributed Leadership, whether they believed that this concept could be introduced in the schools of Mauritius, whether they would be happy to see this concept introduced, whether this concept would yield better results.

### 16) The Perspectives of the Principals

This research revealed the mindset of principals and teachers. Each group diverged from the other. The principals were quite happy to keep the status quo. They were not aware that they were acting in an autocratic way. They firmly believed that they were the representatives of the Ministry in their schools. Whatever decisions they

communicated to teachers, were not theirs, and so, there was no question of debating and changing decisions. They retained all powers because the Ministry had organised the structure in this way. In fact, the principals themselves have no power. They are not autonomous. They are constantly monitored by the Ministry.

Concerning the sharing of leadership with the teaching staff, the principals were quite sceptical about distributing leadership with teachers. For them, teachers are meant to teach and principals to decide. How can fifty teachers in a school be allowed to take decisions? A school cannot take different paths. What about responsibility and accountability? There should be only one person accountable to the Ministry. It is the principal. Teachers themselves might be most reticent to assume leadership roles. There would be too much work to be accomplished, and their teaching would suffer.

The principals recognise that the majority of teachers were quite serious, that they had a sense of duty, that they had the capacity, with training, to assume leadership role, as long as the ultimate power of decision resided with the heads of schools. Decisions cannot be taken by dozens of people. Chaos would ensue.

### 17) The Teachers Perspectives.

Teachers enjoyed being alone in their classrooms, often taking decisions contrary to what the principals had instructed them when they felt that these instructions were not yielding favourable results. In practice they were more autonomous than the principals.

The teachers, contrary to principals, were quite eager to voice out their opinions. They would be quite happy if they were given the chance of participating in the leadership of schools. They laid stress on the importance of building a team. They would carry out consultation with members of the staff, stake - holders, and even students. It was important to get the collaboration of everyone to elaborate a vision. Such policy would ensure that the staff shows greater enthusiasm, work better and give better results. So many schools in the world had introduced shared, distributed leadership, and this had brought positive results in the achievement of students.

### 18) The Use of Computer Software to Perform Text Analysis.

#### How can Computer Software Help Research?

Computers help greatly to retrieve and explore data. Software is very useful to transcribe, edit, code, store, analyse, display, create diagrams and help in reports.

The interviews were recorded. The researcher used the Atlas. ti software to manage, give shape to, and make sense of information, classify, arrange and sort out information. Atlas. ti was used to transcribe the interviews and then coding was done. Coding is assigning a word or phrase that summarises a sentence, a paragraph. It reflects the essence of the meaning. It serves to attach a label to the data. When the coding has been done, the software is fed with the different texts that have been transcribed. The texts are numerated. Atlas. ti will group together the quotations under



different codes. If you need quotations under one code, Atlas.ti will give you all the quotations and the percentage this code represents of all the codes. It prepares the way for the researcher to engage in analysis and explorations.

### 19) How Atlas.ti has Helped in This Research?

From my survey, focus group and interviews, I picked up ten texts from Principals and ten from Teachers and started highlighting words, phrases, sentences which I considered to reflect the views of interviewees on Distributed Leadership. Then, I started coding. I labelled the parts highlighted with expressions grouped under two factors, using thematic approach. They were Pull and Push Factors. The following were used:

Vision, sharing, support, good relationships, risk - taking, enthusiasm, motivation, atmosphere of friendliness, and also:

Distrust, insecurity, accountability, unwillingness to assume leadership roles, limitation of freedom, lack of understanding of the concept, feelings of incompetence, tiredness, burn - out.

The codes were, as we said, grouped under two factors which meant to show acceptance or refusal of Distributed Leadership.

On the Pull Factors, principals code, under the positive factors, less than 40% under each heading.

On the other hand, teachers scored about 90%. Under the heading showing Push Factors, principals scored above 80%. Teachers scored around 30%.

This shows that the culture of Centralisation is deeply ingrained in those who detained power of decision. Although teachers would be most willing to assume leadership role, the Ministry and the principals are not willing to share their power. This is what is preventing the educational system from reaching the highest level of perfection.

In Mauritius, principals are acting in a hierarchical structure. They are the sole leaders of schools. As we said, principals receive instructions from the Ministry which they communicate to teachers who have to put them into practice. No one is free to take initiatives. The principal himself has no power. He has to obey directives. Teachers have to realise the wish of the Ministry even if they find that they are going directly into a wall. A culture of autocratic leadership has been established since two centuries and cannot be changed overnight. Culture is a difficult element to change.

Without moving towards decentralization in the field of leadership, we cannot bring innovation to the system. Many countries are moving towards distributed, shared leadership, which has been found to improve teaching and learning, brings an atmosphere of trust, good relationships among the staff. It is important for teachers to participate in decision - making. The principal has to make use of the expertise of all

his staff. When leadership is shared, it favours decentralization. And, as we said, decentralization has the power to impact positively on teaching and learning. Decentralization brings community closer to the school and enables stake holders to participate in the decision - making process. This collaboration will definitely create changes for the improvement of the school. Ellison and Hayes (2009) assert: *“Successful administrators develop teachers’ innate leadership talents as they move beyond a hierarchical and authoritarian structure leadership”*.

Another example of the ills of centralization in Mauritius is the consequence of the inability of taking prompt decisions in the case of indiscipline in Mauritian schools. Dr Belle (2018) carried out a survey on indiscipline in Mauritian schools and found that *“Schools principals in Mauritius have a limited authority to ensure student discipline”*.

It is, therefore, important for the smooth running of the school to proceed to the decentralization of authority. Learner’s lack of discipline is due to the principals’ lack of leadership and authority. This is the result of the centralization of power and authority (Beebeejaun - Mushim, 2014).

There are a number of items that can benefit from decentralization: Selection of school attended, instruction time, methods of teaching, personnel, management in - service training, planning, resources (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 1998).

### Conclusion

Every nation has to find the right balance between centralization and decentralization (Caldwell, 2009). It is important to decide where authority, responsibility and accountability should reside. Reform cannot lie on authorities deciding that a decentralized or a centralized system is better. It is important to find out which functions should be decentralized and which have to be kept centralized. There is need for systematic evaluations of centralized and decentralized systems. What has to be established is an appropriate balance between the two systems, both top - down and bottom - up approaches. Bernbaum (2011) asserts that when National Governments decentralized functions, *“They retain responsibility for developing appropriate and effective national decentralization policies and strengthening local institutional capacity to assume new responsibility”*.

It is important to be aware of the dangers of a decentralized system. It can lead to a fragmented system (European Agency, 2016a). When decision - making and management power are given to lower levels, it is important that Central Ministries undertake monitoring and training functions (Berbaum, 2011). The role and responsibilities of the staff have to be clarified. Capacity building is important to carry out responsibilities. Decentralization may lead to inequality in inputs. A national standard should be established.

As we can see, Mauritius should not embark blind - folded in the business of decentralization at all costs. Centralization has brought Mauritius to a high level of educational

effectiveness and quality. But definitely, decentralization can make a number of factors progress. It is important to identify those factors and introduce decentralization progressively to make the system perfect. This can be realised if the Government of Mauritius gets rid of its fortress, silo attitude by encouraging all stake holders to come forward with positive suggestions.

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