

Decentralization of Education: Politics and Consensus

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Description: *The worldwide experiences of decentralization of education including success and failure case studies; justification on political decentralization; needs of decentralization; results of decentralization of schools; importance of consensus and consensus building process*

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Abstract: *This book is prepared by the World Bank in 1996 to share the best practices and experiences for policy makers and practitioners of education. Moreover, it also intends to help donor agencies and NGOs as well. Its purpose is to identify the political dimensions of decentralization. This book covers mainly the case studies of decentralization in some countries; causes of decentralization; justifying decentralization as political agenda; accomplishments of decentralization; importance of stakeholders' consensus and finally the ways of building such consensus. As the reviewer, I believe that the decentralization of schools is a global phenomenon however; globally each country has adopted its own type of decentralization. After collapse of Soviet Union, the discourse on decentralization is found to be heightened. Up to now, the global experiences show that centralized systems of education is not working efficiently and effectively as compare to the decentralized systems of education.*

Keywords: consensus, decentralization, deconcentration, devolution, transformation

1. Prologue

Decentralization is the tendency to disperse authority and power from central level authority (e.g. education ministry) to the local bodies (e.g. district education office). The term decentralization implies dispersal of something aggregated or concentrated around a single point (Mc Ginn & Welsh, 1999, p. 19). It is the process of creating an autonomous authority. Decentralization in educational management is never an all-or-nothing phenomenon (Govinda, 1997, p. 8). There are three levels of decision making practice in an administrative decentralization in education i.e. policy making, plan and programme formulation, and program implementation level. All three levels of educational management divide or shares powers in the form of devolution, delegation and deconcentration.

In administrative decentralization, the power flows from higher to lower level. Where, decentralization, in real sense, is the devolution of power. Therefore, decentralization in education means devolving powers with responsibility and accountability to the lower level or branch organization. In devolution, there is substantial degree of discretion and autonomy and the rights of the local body are protected by legislation whereas in delegation, certain functions and responsibilities in the form of authority for limited time are assigned to the lower level of institution. But in deconcentration certain functions which are unwanted, are assigned to the operational level. This is the lowest form of decentralization. In this system the centre reserves the rights

which are given; decentralized body is only responsible not accountable towards the centre for implementing its functions.

The form of decentralization varies from country to country. Which type of decentralization is suited, is depend upon the context of that place e.g. socio-political, geo-political and economic conditions of the country. Basically, the political will and consensus has the major role towards effective implementation of decentralized policies in education. From many studies, it is realized that introducing decentralization demands a fundamental transformation that encompasses the whole field of educational management, demanding the introduction of a new management culture (Govinda, 1997, p. 26). Obviously, such a fundamental transformation cannot be achieved without the strong political consensus and the determination among political parties and the states. For some years, the policy of decentralization is not properly working in Nepal because of the unnecessary political interest and interventions in the education system. The PTA and SMC of community schools and its election, the teacher recruitment and selection process have stood as testimony. In Nepal, political parties and politically motivated community members were now giving SMCs great recognition, resulting in their 'capture' for political and social purposes (Edwards, R. M., 2011, p. 78).

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2. Review

The author presents various experiences on decentralization, for example, there is elected school boards in Chicago, school cluster in Cambodia and voucher system in Chile. All of these experiences of the school decentralization bring changes in policy making, generating revenues, spending funds, training, designing curriculum and managing school resources.

Decentralization as a reform strategy is clearly political because its stated intention is to alter the political status-quo by transferring authority from one level of government and one set of actors to others (p. 7). In Colombia, the political leaders carried out the decentralization in 1985. The municipalities were given sufficient power, which was culminated in the constitution of 1991. Therefore, the decentralization of education became the matter of politics between unions and governments as that of Nepal's experience. World Bank (1995) observed, education is intensely political because it affects the majority of citizens, involves all levels of government, is almost always the single largest component of public spending, and carries public subsidies that are biased in favor of the elite (pp. 5-6).

The different stakeholders have different interests. For example, the political leaders (Policymakers) use educational issues for public supports; the bureaucrats seeks their power and better positions; teachers seek increase in salary and job security they are always suspicious of changes that will jeopardize their security though they are open to improve educational quality and their professional development such as elimination of government financing of education; the universities members also have a professional interest in seeing their ideas carried out in schools; parents often wanted to be empowered; the local communities wants to invest funds in improving roads, water, etc rather than improving schools and the students and their unions also deliver their interests on education. If we believe on customer-driven quality¹ then we must address these stakeholder's needs and interests.

Clarifying objectives of decentralization, Mc Ginn & Welsh (1999) argues that there are three motives namely: political, financial and efficiency motives behind pursuing decentralization policy (p. 29). There are various actors involve in the decentralization process. The actors formulates policy, makes plans and programs, mobilize resources, prepares resources, creates proper environment, promote work culture, conduct research activities, implement the plans and programs, monitor and supervision, resource allocation and controls, investment and consumption, etc. The variety of approaches involves a range of actors, with shifting emphases being placed on these actors depending on the approach adopted. The degree of agency, which these actors are perceived to have, will

¹ Customer-driven quality refers to a notion of quality in which those who are to receive a product or service make explicit their expectations for this product or service and quality is defined in terms of meeting or exceeding the expectations of customers (Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1992, p. 46).

also be affected by a particular interpretation of power distributions (Willis, 2005, p. 25).

According to the author, the improvements in educational system invariably involve trade-offs. The trade off is the give and take policy that is usually take into account in the business as well as politics. There are two types of decentralization. They are, political, or democratic, decentralization involves assigning power to make decisions about education to citizens or to their representatives at lower levels of government. Administrative, or bureaucratic, decentralization, on the other hand, is essentially a management strategy.

Connecting power with people's freedom, Sen (2000) states, what people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people's freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities (p. 5).

Political decentralization, however, involves a multitude of stakeholders, both inside and outside the government, all of whom will have interests to protect or pursue (p. 10). In general, it is fair to say that central authorities should concentrate on setting goals, generating resources, targeting resources to meet special needs, and monitoring performance. Everyday management of schools is best devolved to lower-level authorities, even to local schools. Similarly, theory says that curriculum development requires a level of expertise appropriate to central offices (Hannaway, 1993 as cited in Fiske, 1996, p. 11).

The book presents that the school decentralization in Colombia and Hungary is the result of political interest lead by political crises. The teachers were given considerable powers e.g. selecting principals in Hungary. In Spain, school based management system was set up in 1980s. The decentralization of Spain is found to be politically succeed but managerially weak. Brazil introduced the decentralization in 1990s in order to enhance school efficiency. Brazil introduced the school autonomy (i.e. financial, administrative and pedagogical autonomy) and greater transparency in decision-making that led to increase operational efficiency. The Picot's commission-1998 had brought a radical change in New Zealand's education system. A strong consensus and commitment among school stakeholders had built before implementation of the reform strategies. The government had funded the schools' all expenses. Locally elected people including a student now run the schools in New Zealand. There was laissez-fair ideology in Chile at 1970s. About 43 percent lowest income children had no access to formal schooling. In 1980s, the regime transferred to the local levels. The schools and municipalities were given power like hiring-firing teachers, setting wages, etc. However, due to the lack of capacities, municipalities and school were unable to carry out the decentralized plans and programs. Decentralization of education is still under way. Hannawat (1995) argues, it is in

investment phase (p. 22). The decentralization has the aims to make an economic development in Venezuela.

In the book, the author shows that the worldwide trend of decentralization is concentrated on financial aspect rather than the academic one. Carnoy (1999) states, that the most important reason for decentralization may not be greater teacher or school autonomy but greater control over what teachers do, many of the decentralization reforms do not have their origins in the desire to increase school productivity, but in the need to reduce central government financial and management responsibility for primary and secondary education (p. 54). Therefore, in the real sense decentralization has not brought actual school autonomy but has been imposed by the central government according to the political interests. This reality could not be elaborated in this book. A sort of mentality or orientalism² towards 'decentralization is the best' has found to be working in this book. Decentralization led to increased operating efficiency in Mexico, where teachers are now paid regularly. Argentina provides an example of the shifting of financial responsibility away from the central government to regional and local bodies. On the other hand, decentralization as a strategy for economic development backfired in Venezuela. One negative consequence of decentralization has to do with widening performance gaps between students in wealthy and poor areas. Ricardo Lagos, writes, decentralization can lead to increased inequalities (p.28). Colombia, for example, adopted a system of vouchers for the poor.

Overall, after reading the international experiences in the book, it can be said that different countries have decentralized school management for different purposes such as solving regional problem in Spain, promoting local autonomy in Brazil, paying teachers in time in Mexico, socialist spirit in Zimbabwe, down loading fiscal problem in Argentina, and promoting democracy in India (Gaynor, 1998, as cited in Khaniya, 2007, p. 258). Effective decentralization will require a well-conceived plan for the sharing of power. The worldwide experiences show that, most of the decentralizations failed because of the lack of commitment and consensus. In this book, reviewer has felt that the author has given more emphasis on decentralization although it is not the panacea for country's development. The political dimension of the development has been focused more than the development one. For decentralization to be effective, the employees must be better trained and educated. Their decision-making abilities have to be enhanced. Decentralization is, therefore, time consuming and costly affair (Acharya et al, 2011, p. 143). Harber and Davies (1997) says, schools in developing countries must contribute to the development of the skills, values and behaviours associated with peaceful conflict management if they are to be judged effective (p.153).

3. Conclusion

The reviewed book stresses that the consensus among various actors, is found to be the vital work for successful decentralization. According to author the consensus can be built through identifying stakeholders and their interests; building legitimate interests into the model; organizing public discussion properly; clarifying the purposes of decentralization; analyzing the obstacles to decentralization; respecting the roles of various actors; providing adequate training; and developing a good monitoring system.

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² Orientalism is the 1978 book by Edward Said that has been highly influential in postcolonial studies. In the book, Said writes that "Orientalism" is a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East. Retrieved from [http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Orientalism+\(book\)](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Orientalism+(book)) retrieved on 18 June 2013.