A conversation on the decentralization of education: pros, cons, risks and benefits

Debate

Microplanning of education

“Countries across the world have adopted different models to structure and organize their education systems, as well as new approaches and processes in their management. The organizational 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) Advanced Training Programme 2017-2018 course outline, p. 65)

Decentralization is currently a popular reform. It can offer national policy makers ways to alleviate the financial burden on the state, ensure more efficient management, increase participation in, and ownership of, reforms, and ideally the commitment of local decision-makers and parents. Supporters of decentralization argue that bringing this decision-making closer to the beneficiaries will help improve the quality of education and children’s learning outcomes. However, it can also lead to a number of challenges, like increasing of disparities between regions, districts, cities, and schools. Specific attention must be paid to the design and implementation of decentralization policies, in line with the objectives they intend to reach.

As part of IIEP’s specialized course on the organization and management of the education sector Candy Lugaz and Chloe Chimier from IIEP discussed these issues with Maria-Varinia Michalun, Policy Analyst and Project Manager at the OECD and Janet Looney, Director of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy.

IIEP: What have been some of the main reasons behind current trends towards decentralization?

M-V Michalun: The reasons for decentralizing depend on the country and the context, but one of the reasons has been a desire for national authorities to bring decision-making and service delivery closer to local needs. Decentralization, when well designed and implemented, can allow policies and programmes to be better targeted to the local situation, contributing to greater stability and democratic and economic development, as well as contributing to stronger cohesion, increased accountability and ultimately more trust in government.
Decentralization is not an objective in itself. Decentralization is a process. This is often forgotten, especially amongst national policy makers. If the policy is to improve learning outcomes, then decentralization, if the right conditions are in place, can serve as a possible tool to achieve that policy. Such conditions would include, for example, a clear attribution of responsibilities, sufficient resources and sufficient capacity, amongst others.

Janet Looney: In terms of greater school autonomy, pedagogical autonomy is one of the main reasons, enabling teachers to get closer to their learners and their needs, closer to parents and the community. It can also help better meet the needs of diverse learners. Greater school autonomy often leads to better education outcomes; it recognizes the expertise of the teacher to know what is best for their students. In situations where there are strong accountability and investments in building capacity, schools get better results.

IIEP: In countries in which you have worked, how were decentralization policies implemented? From a bottom-up or a top-down perspective?

M-V Michalun: Decentralization is generally a political decision and therefore a top-down approach is more common. Bottom-up cases have been observed in some cases, for example, local governments joining forces to deliver a service and then requesting support from higher levels of government. Requests made from the bottom-up are not often a request for “decentralization” per se, but a call for more local decision-making autonomy or revenue-generating capacity.

Janet Looney: Some countries have a political culture of decentralization, as in the case of Denmark or the United States. However, decentralization can be a shock the system where there is no tradition. It is not always welcome. There can be perception of less funds as well as a perceived lack of support if the decentralization process is not accompanied by appropriate capacity building.

IIEP: What is your experience with participatory approaches to consultations?

M-V Michalun: What needs to be identified are the major actors – the ones who are likely to be most affected – they are the ones you would need to consult. Consultations should be for obtaining feedback but perhaps not on whether to decentralize. It should also be clear how the results of consultation will be used, and if feedback is not used, why it has not been used.

Janet Looney: Consultation with stakeholders works well if you are looking at the big picture and for “ownership” for an overall vision. There have been positive examples from Chile and British Colombia. Stakeholder engagement has also helped to ensure the needs of marginalized students being better met. Citizen and stakeholder buy-in will, in theory, lead to more sustainable reforms.

IIEP: What is the role of central authorities within a decentralized state?

M-V Michalun: There will always be a need for a central government, for central level legal and fiscal frameworks. Decentralization needs both horizontal and vertical levels of cooperation: the whole of government, all actors and all sectors working together for greater cohesion. Central government ultimately becomes the coordinator and steers the ship. Questions of equity and decentralization are also important. Decentralization can lead to less equity in the provision of resources. The role of central government is to mitigate this.

Janet Looney: Central government is important for equity but also for quality issues, for example to ensure the effective distribution of teachers, for information gathering and sharing, for providing
guidelines, frameworks and supporting networks. Central government can help ensure that policies are coherent and that you don’t end up with a patchwork of policies. For example, if we take the issue of teacher allocation, school-level hiring may be based on “mission matches”, that is the match of teacher’s own intrinsic incentives and values, or their mission, with the school leadership and staff. When missions match teachers stay longer. One of the major challenges is to ensure that disadvantaged schools do not end up with less qualified and inexperienced teachers. No government has yet found a fail-safe solution.

**IIEP: How do countries monitor the process and the challenges? What indicators can be used for monitoring and evaluation?**

**M-V Michalun:** As mentioned earlier, decentralization is a tool and not an objective. There is a need to monitor and evaluate the objectives for which you are using decentralization as the tool. Scotland has a well-developed indicator system, [Scotland Performs](https://www.scotlandsperforms.gov.scot), to report on progress in government, one of which was [Smarter](https://www.smarter.gov.scot), to expand opportunities for people in Scotland to succeed from nurture through to lifelong learning ensuring higher and more widely shared achievements.

**Janet Looney:** It depends on what type of decentralization. For pedagogical decentralization, the Inspectorate would be a logical place to start, as they would be monitoring what is happening in schools, and have the data to learn where they can improve and on what. Over the past five years, at least in Europe, there has been a move away from top down monitoring and accountability.

**IIEP: Do you know of any examples of recentralization and why this may happened?**

**M-V Michalun:** There are not many examples. Those that come to mind are of recentralization not back to a central level but to a regional level. In some situations, recentralization may be due to the high cost of the services involved, as in case of health care or specialised education – higher education or vocational education.

**Janet Looney:** Recentralization can be due to a political agenda, for example, wanting to have greater control over education. Another example might be aspects of curriculum and assessment where there may need to be more standardization across schools to be effective.

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