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# DECENTRALIZATION IN EDUCATION: EUROPEAN POLICIES AND PRACTICES

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**Abstract.** *The article probes into factors that determine processes of decentralization in managing the general education system. The study entails a review of pertinent literature and an analysis of the distribution of powers among entities managing the general education system based on the European countries' experience. The study concludes that the education management system in the most EU-countries is decentralized or gradually being decentralized and de-concentrated on the basis of the subsidiarity principle. The results of our research give the possibility to affirm that the successful implementation of the decentralization reform requires the following two conditions: political support for proposed changes and the ability of those charged with carrying out the reform. An analysis of literature confirms that decentralization as a process is also a function of factors other than political will and capacity. These factors include trust (the extent of decentralization depends on the central government's trust in the local government, and vice versa), financial troubles, path dances, international developments, etc. An analysis of the distribution of decision making powers in areas of financing and human resources demonstrates that there is a trend towards decentralization, albeit inconsistent due to obstacles on the level of centralized management. The article maintains that there has to be an adequate balance between centralization, which is necessary for the implementation of general national educational objectives, and decentralization, which allows teachers, schoolchildren, parents and the representatives of local communities to participate in education management.*

**Key words:** *centralization; decentralization; globalization; education policy; educational reforms.*

## INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT

Reasons for decentralization are abundant. In some cases it is a question of increasing efficiency in management and governance. Where the state bureaucracy appears heavy and slow, where it has proven unable to tackle issues of teacher deployment, teacher payment, purchase and distribution of equipment and material or maintenance of buildings, decentralization appears to be the solution: it can allow a faster identification of problems and the search for more appropriate responses. In many cases, decentralization is also the result of the process of political democratization: people want to be consulted and involved in decision-making that concerns them directly. Decentralization also helps in clarifying lines of accountability. Several other reasons are behind such administrative reform moves, including the desire of certain governments to reduce the power of teachers' unions. But for developing countries as Ukraine the prime motor of decentralization may have been the search for new resources. Central governments devolve

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the management of the schools that they can no longer finance. Decentralization allows for the mobilization of resources at the local level, through special taxes or community participation that would not be available otherwise. Even if the state largely continues to finance education through the provision of funds to regional authorities, it is assumed that scarce public funds will be used more carefully.

Decentralization processes in education systems is a topic that is extremely relevant in the up to date policy background. This is mainly true in the context of reforms likely to be needed as countries move towards a more inclusive system. A central issue in the reform effort for every nation is getting the right equilibrium between centralization and decentralization. The main source of tension and subject of debate lies in formulating and implementing policy that decides where authority, responsibility and accountability ought to reside. The idea of transferring responsibility and decision-making to local bodies appears to sit well with more self-governing and participatory approaches. These are an integral part of inclusive policy and practice. Nevertheless, the complex decentralized systems mail creates it more difficult to make sure transparent funding and equitable opportunities for all learners. J. Zajda is writing about the ‘necessity to understand who controls and who ought to control education’ as it is the imperative behind exploring decentralization. It is also important to examine exactly which functions should be decentralized. These can be, for example, administration, personnel, financing, and curriculum and assessment (Zajda, 2012).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on decentralization is vast. Much of it focuses on the conceptual aspects of decentralization, defining and differentiating terms that connote different kinds or degrees of decentralization (Rondinelli, 1981; Rondinelli, Nellis, & Cheema; 1983; Winkler, 1989, 2005; Weiler, 1990; Welsh & McGinn, 1999; Winkler & Gershberg, 2003; Shah & Thompson 2004; Kim, 2008; Edwards, 2010); the reasons why governments decentralize (Winkler, 1989, 2005; Weiler, 1990; Welsh & McGinn; Naidoo, 2002; Cohen, 2004); the extent to which countries have decentralized (Winkler, 1989; Welsh & McGinn; Winkler & Gershberg); and country-specific or cross-national comparative case studies or accounts of various efforts to decentralize (Parry, 1997; Levitas & Herczynski, 2001; World Bank, 2004; Navarro, 2007). There is as well a vast body of literature on the political economy of decentralization (Angell, Lowden, & Thorp, 2001; Kaufman & Nelson, 2004; and Stein, Tomassi, Echebarrna, Lora, & Payne, 2006).

Problems of education management and education decentralisation are being explored by a large number of scholars, in particular, by A. Androniceanu, M. Bernbaum, M. Busemeyer, M. Herbst, A. Patapas, P. Rado, J. Urbanovic, J. Weidman, H. Weiler, etc.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research method was used in this study. According to OECD methodology, education decentralization can be measured on the basis of the location of decision-making affecting each of the four types of decisions in education systems: organization of instruction (curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, schedule); personnel management (hiring/firing, pay, assigning teaching responsibilities, and training); planning and structures; and resources and spending. However, this data represents a starting point for a more comprehensive measure of education decentralization in cross-country studies.

## **MAIN RESULTS**

Decentralization is a term used when responsibility or power is passed to local communities and schools. They can then make their own decisions about many aspects of policy and practice.

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In centralized systems, a central body might control finance, personnel and resources and also manage policy, curriculum and assessment. Many researchers as A. Androniceanu, B. Ristea, M. Busemeyer, J. Urbanovič, A. Patapas suggest that, in decentralized systems, resources can be used more efficiently. This in turn can lead to improved learner performance, higher parental satisfaction and stronger accountability with community involvement and support (Androniceanu and Ristea, 2014; Busemeyer, 2012; Urbanovič and Patapas, 2012).

Systematic evaluations of decentralized systems are lacking. On the other hand, effective and efficient government seems to require an appropriate stability of centralization and decentralization (both top-down and bottom-up approaches). Even when national governments decentralize functions: ‘...they retain significant responsibility for developing appropriate and effective national decentralization policies and strengthening local institutional capacity to assume new responsibility’ (Bernbaum, 2011: p. 8).

The models of decentralization most often discussed in the research (for example, P. Rady, 2010; M. Bernbaum, 2011) are delegation, deconcentration, devolution and decoupling.

*Delegation* is a transmission of tasks and administrative functions related to definite functions, usually determined by central authorities. This process does not result in a shift in power, as the local agents only have to implement decisions made centrally. An example is when a ministry of education delegates authority to a national examination board which prepares, administers and marks national exams.

*Deconcentration* can appear to be a move towards a more democratic model, as some authority and responsibility are passed to “lower” system levels. But, this model usually retains extremely centralized operations. The local units may act as agents of central government and be responsible for implementing rules – but not for making decisions or policies. For example, a central body may create district offices to carry out central functions on its behalf, but overall control remains with the central government.

*Devolution* transfers authority and real responsibility from central to local bodies. According to UNESCO (2014), the devolution of authority in key decision-making areas – such as finance and staffing – has the potential to empower local school communities and improve learner outcomes. Weiler (1993) offers an alternative. He refers to the ‘redistributive model’ dealing with top-down distribution of power, the ‘effectiveness model’ focusing on financial aspects and cost-effectiveness of decentralization, and the ‘learning culture’ model that addresses cultural diversity and curricula adaptability to local needs.

*Decoupling* addresses the decoupling between policy directives, implementation and outcomes. It is important for explaining divergent patterns of organizational development in schools. Decoupling serves to protect local schools from too much external scrutiny. This results in more autonomy at the local level and little evidence of ineffectiveness. Furthermore, decoupling occurs with the tacit agreement of all players, from the community to school personnel (Meyer and Rowan, 2008).

These different models of decentralization are not yet generally in use when considering countries’ systems. However, they have the potential to be applied in order to provide greater clarity to future work.

The measurement of decentralization in education is particularly complicated. Economists often measure decentralization to lower levels of government by looking at the percent of educational incomes that come from regional sources, or, alternatively, by looking at the share of educational resources that local governments control. Using these measures, education is more centralized in countries such as Greece, Italy, and France and more decentralized in countries such as Germany, Poland, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the measure may be deceptive when central governments mandate educational policies or programs that require the local government to appropriate its incomes in a certain

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way. Mandating decrease in class size or the creation of special education programs, for example, reduces the degree of power the local government has to allocate its own incomes or resources. In Germany, the federal and federal state governments influence local education resource allocation both through unfunded policy and program mandates and through the use of conditional grants-in-aid, which require local governments or school districts to match federal or state funding for certain purposes. The combination of these mandates and conditional grants results in local school districts having discretionary expenditure control over only a small portion of their revenues and budgets.

Researchers who support education decentralization argue that they can improve quality and satisfy local demand due to better information about local requests. Such systems can also give more democratic control, participation and choice for families. Other scientists as J. Urbanovič, A. Patapas, M. Busemeyer point out that increased competition among localities can lead to greater efficiency. Moreover, in terms of reform, creating smaller, more flexible units may help to overcome the inertia and bureaucracy of larger systems.

There is only incomplete evidence that decentralization alone increases education quality. However, ‘the more the process focuses on quality issues and the closer decentralization actions are to the school or community, the more likely it is that decentralization, combined with other needed inputs, will contribute to raising education quality’ asserts M. Bernbaum. Recent Agency work on financing mechanisms for inclusive education (European Agency, 2016a) also suggests that more decentralized systems appear to create a greater opportunity for developing innovative forms of inclusive education. These systems have more flexible learning and support and strengthened school governance (Stubbs, 2008; NESSE, 2012).

J. C. Weidman and R. DePietro-Jurand declare that transferring responsibility and authority for education services to local or regional governments might result in increased accountability and efficiency. This is because it shortens the distance between parent and policy-maker or policy-maker and school. It may also strengthen parental demand for greater quality and improve managers’ capacity to implement programs (Weidman and DePietro-Jurand, 2011).

P. Rady points out that centralized governance and management systems in education may fail to involve key stakeholder groups in decision-making (i.e. weak democratic political legitimacy). This reduces the stakeholders’ capacity to implement decisions (i.e. low professional legitimacy). He notes that these deficiencies can add up to a “legitimacy crisis” in the centralized systems.

As the European Agency results of monitoring research completed in 2016 show “the decentralized systems can face effectiveness, equity and accountability issues when badly coordinated provision leads to a fragmented system” (European Agency, 2016a). Some of these challenges arise due to central ministries not undertaking monitoring and training functions to give real decision-making and management power to lower levels. They may also ‘arise from difficulties in executing decisions at the local level due to a lack of funding from the decision-makers’ asserts M. Bernbaum (Bernbaum, 2011). He stresses that the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of relevant staff when working with ministries of education. It is also necessary to support capacity-building to assist staff to carry out these roles and responsibilities. It is especially important to ensure that:

- there is no duplication in the division of roles between different system levels;
- funding is commensurate with responsibilities;
- there is action to increase the capacity of local areas.

The researcher also adds that, ‘beyond working within the ministries of education, it is important to interact with key actors from the ministry of finance and other relevant ministries and/or autonomous or semi-autonomous bodies’. Overall, strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms are required to ensure that resource allocation and the implementation of policy goals are consistent. German researcher T. Burns stresses on the necessity to ‘align accountability

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pressures within and across governance levels, across programs and stakeholders – all with a focus on dialogue and transparency’ (Burns et al., 2016).

Decentralization leads to increased school autonomy and competition. This may exacerbate differences between schools and educational outcomes and, in the longer term, social inequalities. Many countries attempt to address this risk of inequality in inputs and service quality by introducing national standards for education services.

M. Herbst and A. Wojciuk proclaim that countries may also redistribute resources in an attempt to neutralize the effects of uneven local taxes (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2014). M. Busemeyer suggests that decentralization can lead to more, rather than less, bureaucracy and create administrative overload at local level. Local institutions can be captured by special interests and ‘gaming’ of the system can occur when performance standards are set at the distant national level. In the context of high quality education for all learners, benefits are seen when the culture both within and among school communities is collaborative – not competitive (Busemeyer, 2012).

A further challenge is the provision of accurate data. Actors at all levels need clear and relevant information on the academic and financial performance of their schools relative to other schools. This includes expenses, resource use and education outcomes. There is also a need to consider the use of education information with wider stakeholders – for example, service users. This in turn requires action to improve the capacity to use information at the local level, and recognition that this is also likely to increase demand for information.

During the past decades, decentralization has come to be seen as a way to ensure the application of management principles and create conditions for the representation of the concerns of all stakeholders in education. However, these two aspects partially contradict each other. According to the model of the education services market, the production and consumption of education services must be separated in order to depoliticize administrative processes. This changes the participatory nature of communities and concerned groups with regard to management. As already mentioned, market mechanisms are most effective when consumers themselves obtain information about their options and thus practice their right to choose. This promotes competition among service providers. However, by choosing a particular product, consumers influence only the product’s viability in the market and not the producer’s decision on which product should be introduced into the market. Producers create demand for products and offer novelties (i.e. employ marketing, thus bypassing the community’s active participation in decision making). On the other hand, practice shows that active involvement of interested parties in the process of planning and decision making increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Nowadays in the West European countries decentralization is determining as one of the key strategies of reforming educational institutions based on a market model advocated by managerial ideas in public administration. European researchers proclaim that municipal authorities should have sufficient freedom to make decisions while schools should have a sufficient degree of autonomy to apply principles of business management.

The most instructive and exciting experience of achieving success on the way to decentralization have demonstrated by such European countries as Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia, Spain.

*Ireland* is considered a country, which, up to very recently, has generally taken a relatively centralized approach to education governance. The central government has developed a resource allocation model for learners identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The incentive behind changing the existing model was a concern about its lack of equity. Resources were allocated to schools based on the assessment and diagnosis of individual learners’ SEN. The risk of over-identifying certain minority groups of learners with SEN and the increased risk of lower expectations based on labelling or diagnosis were also reasons for changing the existing model. Furthermore, there was concern that the allocation system was not linked to schools’ needs.

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*Iceland* (a country taking much decentralized approach to education) reported on their main challenges regarding regional disparity in educational inputs and quality of educational outcomes. These mainly involve unequal access to funds and resources, such as specialists and qualified teachers. As a strategy for equal opportunity across areas, Iceland has established the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund. It redistributes resources among municipalities in Iceland. The fund has a role in equalizing the municipalities' abilities to raise revenues and meet expenditures. Over 10% of the revenues of local authorities come from the Equalization Fund. These take the form of special allocations, equalization contributions and contributions such as the transfer of costs of services for learners with recognized SEN.

*Slovenia* reports divergence among communities in terms of national examinations results, school differences, and a lack of ambition and collaboration among those who are working with individual learners. Slovenia's response to regional disparity is to examine the reasons for the different national examinations results and to emphasize cooperation with parents and other professionals through better communication and co-ordination of practice. It furthermore aims to increase flexibility in the process of obtaining a legal decision for additional educational support to meet individual learning needs and to stress the significance of individual education plans for learners with SEN.

*Malta* is responding to quality assurance challenges by shifting from a completely centralized system towards a more appropriately balanced centralized and decentralized system. It is moving away from a system where schools were externally reviewed through a thorough – yet questionably sustainable – cycle. These meant schools underwent formal external evaluation once every 10 years. The move is towards empowering schools to perform an effective and valid school self-evaluation. This informs meaningful school development plans to steer school improvement.

*Norway* presents an example of a decentralized system that is dealing with the following challenges: how local authorities interpret regulations and national goals; how they prioritize at local level; how schools work with the curricula; how to assure the quality of learners' educational outcomes. Norway's strategies to address these challenges involve, among others, the use of differently themed inspections conducted through dialogue with schools. The school inspections are based on different concerns, such as investigating how schools follow and implement education plans. Quality assurance is also accomplished through national tests, monitoring national measures and providing guidance and support for curriculum development through online material, an advisory team, national resource centers and a national support system for SEN. An annual questionnaire aimed directly at learners is part of the quality assurance process. It asks learners how they feel about their schools and their learning environment.

*Spain* faces challenges in providing accurate data within a decentralized system. These challenges manifest in the lack of data from private schools, as it is not included to the same degree as data from public schools. Bureaucracy is increasing in the system and problems in accessing information on statistical data within the administration are perceived. However, a greater challenge is seen in the different ways the Autonomous Communities collect and then analyze the available data. Strategies to counter these challenges involve a framework for joint statistical work between the Ministry of Education and the Autonomous Communities. Furthermore, the use of management applications in private schools is being promoted to support data collection. Opportunities are presented by the statistical use of existing administrative registers and by cross-referencing these with other ministries, as well as using existing information networks.

In *Latvia*, public sector governance is centralized. The challenges regarding data collection focus on: the potential danger of incorrect data use; the lack of qualitative data – such as on how support is provided; the inability to use the quantitative data to compare the development of outcomes; the long time it takes to collect data about the current situation. The strategies proposed to counter these challenges are to improve the National Education Information System (NEIS),

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to avoid the possibility of entering data about learners in several educational institutions and to organize data use for registered users and for public access.

In *Finland* decentralization is a core idea in education, and it is implemented in the Finnish education system in several important ways. Local providers of education (municipalities) and local teachers prepare the local curriculum. In doing so, they localize the aims and content of the curriculum and they describe how education is organized and how the students are assessed. Local providers of education collect tax moneys and decide how the resources are allocated to schools.

The main motivation for decentralization in education is that local level decision making takes local characteristics into consideration. This gives teachers a feeling of ownership and enables them to allocate resources to the real planning and implementation of education—not for inspection and control. This empowers teachers to collaborate, and it supports their ongoing commitment to life-long-learning.

As Finnish researchers underline the decentralization allows teachers to consider the local context and to address the diversity among the students they teach. Therefore, governance decentralization in education is strongly linked to the Finnish way of interpreting teacher professionalism and teacher status in Finnish society. However, the concept of teacher professionalism is complex, and it has been defined in several ways. In addition, a variety of terms, such as “effective”, “competent”, “expert”, “quality”, “ideal” or “respected”, have been used to describe a professional teacher.

In *Germany*, political authority for school-based education is vested with the regions (*germ.* *Länder*); during last years there has been an increase in political authority at sub-national levels. Using data from the German extension study of PISA 2003, it was found that some responsibilities delegated to school level were associated with higher mean scores in mathematical literacy. In particular, in those schools where the head teacher reported autonomy over personnel management, scores were higher; this might be because such schools are able to utilize their teaching staff and teaching methods to meet the specific needs of the pupils in the school. Interestingly, schools reporting autonomy over the curriculum had lower mean scores than schools without: this finding may be explained by the fact that it was not possible to control for centralized examinations, which were only introduced in 2002.

The system of education management in *Ukraine* is being gradually decentralized. The started in 2014 decentralization reforms, although incomplete, have already brought significant change to Ukraine. After two decades of power being concentrated in the capital, new regional administrations now have more responsibility for local services. On March 2016 a Concept of Establishment of Pivotal Schools was adopted. The main objective of the establishment of pivotal schools is to procure the quality of education, equal access to qualitative education, as well as the matters pertaining to resources utilization efficiency. The concept provides that elementary schools in the countryside will remain at the place of residence of the child, and students of 5th through 9th grades will go to the pivotal school. The decision on optimization of the educational system in their territory, and on the establishment of pivotal schools will be made by the communities themselves. Concurrently, a respective infrastructure will be established, as well as opportunities for the carriage of students and teachers from the basic school to the pivotal school will be offered. On November 2016, the Government reallocated more than UAH 1.6 billion of the educational subsidy intended for the enhancement of facilities and resources of schools, purchase of buses, and support of education in the amalgamated communities. In particular, UAH 300 million are appropriated to assist the amalgamated communities in purchasing school buses, equipment of schools with teaching aids and computerized complexes comprising multimedia training tools, and implementation of energy saving technologies. Separately, the funds in the amount of UAH 300 million are also appropriated to equip schools specializing in natural science subjects and mathematics, as well as pivotal schools, with teaching aids. UAH 200 million from the reallocation

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are appropriated for the purchase of buses taking schoolchildren to pivotal schools. The purchase of buses will be carried out on the principles of co-financing, where 70% of the funds come from the state budget, and 30%, from local budgets. All that is left to do is to hope that decentralization of the education management in Ukraine will also have a beneficial effect on the quality of domestic education to the same extent as in European Union.

## CONCLUSIONS

More and more countries are emphasizing policy and implementation plans and are wrestling with corresponding central government support and regulatory measures to constantly develop the education system (UNESCO, 2014). It highlights the necessity for greater attention to specific aspects of country contexts when exploring decentralization. Especially, it has attempted to highlight the possible impact of different degrees of decentralization/centralization linked to different dimensions of the education system.

It argues against viewing country education systems on a one-dimensional continuum from highly centralized to highly decentralized. Moreover, it might be more acceptable and effective to view them as presenting a pattern and profile of decision making relating to different dimensions occurring at different system levels.

Every model of decentralization has to be appropriate to both the country and local area contexts, given that 'even the best policies travel badly' (Harris, 2012: p. 395). Rather than trying to reproduce policy from other countries, international practice should serve to 'enrich policy analysis, not to short-cut it' (Raffe, 2011: p. 3). In addition, attention of scientific community may focus on clarifying historical reasons for policies and practices. It is absolutely necessary to pay attention to contextual factors, which have more impact on educational settings than policy borrowed from other countries can hope to achieve (Raffe, 2011).

The article confirms the thought that decentralization is multifaceted and complex. We have extended previous research by exploring different types of decentralization in the field of education and found that policies pursued as a result of decentralization differ and may be associated with differing educational outcomes. Although much of the debate in relation to decentralization in education has focused on the delegation of management and administration to schools, more attention could be given to the relationship between sub-national policies and outcomes; of particular interest are those relating to pupil selection, admissions and assessment. Given the evidence relating socio-economic background to achievement, it is important to know this interacts with policies pursued, in order to provide further insights into the possible consequences of different types of decentralization on pupils' educational outcomes and how these might be optimized.

Decentralization of education causes changes in the coordination of the subjects of education system which determine the increase of school responsibility. The main elements of school autonomy are the decrease of the role of governmental management and the increase of school responsibility.

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