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Centralisation versus Decentralisation in Education

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Abstract

The concepts of centralisation and decentralisation have been the hot topics of discussion among management academicians as well as practicing managers. There is not much consensus on the scope of these constructs; while one theorist may refer an organisational decision-making process as highly centralised, other theorists may regard it as mildly centralised. For general understanding, we may regard centralisation as concentration of power at the top level of an organisation or a society. Extreme case of centralisation is usually labelled as one-man rule. On the other hand, decentralisation refers to the extent of decisions being taken at the lower levels of an organisation or a society. In recent years, focus on decentralisation has increased as it can lead to flexible, innovative and creative management.

Keywords: Centralization, Decentralization, Education, Management

Why Decentralization?

We must seriously think about why we need decentralization in our education system. Couldn't we carry out our assigned tasks without bothering much about such concepts? In response to such questions, Henry Mintzberg opines,

"Simply because all the decisions cannot be understood at one centre, in one brain. Sometimes the necessary information just cannot be brought to that centre. Perhaps too much of it is soft, difficult to transmit."¹

Advantages of Decentralization

Notwithstanding the limitations of decentralization, the concept certainly has the following advantages:-

- It facilitates easing of unnecessary burden on educational policy makers and managers at senior levels of an organisation or a society.

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- It allows the people most concerned with the problem or issue to make decisions. Since these people usually know more about the factors underlying a decision-making situation, they are considered more suited to make suitable decisions without further delay.
- Cost of decision making and implementation in case of decentralised operations is usually lower than in case of centralisation, since it would also require central coordination.
- It makes educational managers more confident about the capabilities of their subordinates.
- It grooms and encourages local managers to take risks.
- It helps managers to develop and groom their subordinates for future responsibilities in the senior cadres.
- It raises the level of motivation in the organization due to participation of lower ranks in the decision making and executive processes.
- It enables the senior managers to tap available human resources to do things more efficiently and more effectively at the same time.
- And finally, the concept of decentralization fits well in the overall scheme of democratic organizational setup.

The Centralisation-Decentralisation Continuum

The concepts of centralisation and decentralisation are not paradoxical entities; therefore, the question never arises of choosing either centralisation or decentralisation. Centralisation – decentralisation can be best explained as opposite points on a single continuum as depicted below:-



The Centralisation-Decentralisation Continuum

Thus, the advantages of one tend to be the disadvantages of the other. According to Peterson:

“The test is not always whether to centralise or to decentralise authority, it is rather the degree to which the element of concentration shall prevail.”²

In real life, we seldom find any system similar to pure centralisation (where all decisions are taken by a single person) or pure decentralisation where everyone is actively involved in the decision-making process.

Centralisation versus Decentralisation in Education

There are many connotations related to relevance/application of the concept of centralisation-decentralisation in education sector; for instance:-

- How far the state accepts responsibility for provision of educational facilities vis-à-vis the individuals, families, social groups or private organisations?
- To what extent, the division of power exists between the central, state/provincial and local governments in educational matters?
- And finally, to what extent, the decisions are concentrated in the Ministry of Education or in any other educational organisation?

Three Forms of Decentralisation in Education

International Encyclopedia of Education identifies three forms of decentralisation in education system:-

- (i) Organisational Decentralisation.
- (ii) Political Decentralisation.
- (iii) Economic Decentralisation.

Organisational Decentralisation

It refers to an arrangement whereby the professionals in schools make important decisions regarding the educational wellbeing of children. Organisational decentralisation is also compatible with the concept of democracy, where organisational authority is assigned to professionals of various fields to make decisions in their respective areas.

Political Decentralisation

It refers to an arrangement whereby the parents of children studying in the public schools make policy decisions through a representative Board

of Governors. Such boards may exercise some executive powers in appointment of key personnel of the institution, such as, principal/headmaster, heads of different departments, administrative staff, etc. Public school system is a valid example of such decentralisation, whereby the Board of Governors (representing provincial/district government, philanthropists, community leaders, or renowned personalities/professionals) is entrusted with legitimate authority to take decisions in defined areas of the school management.

Economic Decentralisation

A community following the concept of economic decentralisation prefers an arrangement whereby parents choose a particular school (considering it the best) for their children. In such a case, parents sponsor these institutions by paying tuition fees and/or by donating some money. Such educational institutions usually function on the basis of economic principles; school is considered as a service-provider and children/parents as customers.

Degree and Scope of Decentralisation of Education in Pakistan

The Constitution of Pakistan spells out the scope of decentralisation of education by declaring it as a provincial subject; therefore, all educational matters, except a few, like higher education and school curriculum, fall under the jurisdiction of the respective provincial governments. At provincial level, the responsibility of providing educational services starts from the Provincial Education Minister, assisted by the Secretary of Education. Since year 2000, education system at district level was revamped under the aegis of the famous Devolution Plan and the District Education Coordinator (DEC) was placed under the respective District Nazim. Under one DEC, there are two District Education Officers (DEOs), one each for Primary and Secondary Education (both for boys and girls schools). Each DEO is assisted by a Deputy DEO at district level and by several Assistant DEOs at Tehsil level. The results of this devolution of power in educational matters have been mixed. While in many cases, decisions are known to be made on rational and equitable basis; there have been several instances of misuse of authority, especially by the political authorities and DEOs.

Conclusion

Centralisation refers to concentration of power at the top level; while decentralisation means the extent of decisions being taken at the lower levels of an organisation or a society. The concepts of centralisation and

decentralisation are two extreme of the same continuum. The question is not about going for centralisation or decentralisation; rather it is about how much centralisation or decentralisation to be adopted under the given circumstances. There are three connotations about centralisation vs decentralisation in education. First concerns how far the state accepts responsibility for provision of educational facilities. Secondly, it may also reflect the division of power between the central, state/provincial and local governments in educational matters. And thirdly, it may indicate the extent to which the decisions are concentrated in the Ministry of Education or in any other educational organisation. We may identify three kinds of decentralisation in education, namely organisational decentralisation, political decentralisation and economic decentralisation. Organisational decentralisation refers to an arrangement whereby the professionals in schools make important decisions regarding the educational wellbeing of children. Political decentralisation refers to an arrangement whereby the parents of children studying in the public schools make policy decisions through a representative Board of Governors. Economic decentralisation means an arrangement whereby parents choose a particular school (considering it the best) for their children. In Pakistan, the responsibilities of providing educational services to citizens are somewhat decentralised in a sense that higher education and school curriculum are taken care of by the Federal Government; while rest of the types and levels of education are the responsibilities of the provincial governments.

Notes & References

¹ Henry Mintzberg, *The Nature of Managerial Work* (New York: Harder & Row Publishers Inc., 1979), p.182

² Elmore Petersen; Edward Grosvenor Plowman, *Business Organisation and Management* (Englewood, Illionis: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1960)