



**Research Article**

## **DEMOCRACY, DECENTRALIZATION, AND PUBLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN NEPAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with public school governance in terms of policies and practices of the federal democratic republic in Nepal. The preamble and articles of the new constitution are guided through national democratic values and norms. They assume the overall system, including education, would be democratically run and governed by the values of democracy and decentralization. This paper raises a few questions on the current process of democracy, decentralization, and governance concerning the education system at the school level. The fundamental question is whether the public schools are governed democratically, in a decentralized way through participatory democracy at the local level as assumed in the constitution. To look for the answer to these questions, some relevant policy documents will be analyzed. In addition, some representative sample public schools within Kathmandu valley will be purposively selected. Students' public school governance policies and practices will be analyzed based on the documents/records available from the selected schools and some in-depth interviews with teachers, school management committee members, and parent-teacher association. The analysis will focus on the assessment of policies of public school governance and their procedures at the local level from the perspective of democracy, decentralization, and good governance. Finally, this research will identify the gaps between policy and practice regarding public governance from democracy and decentralization.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Context**

We want to begin the discussion on democracy and decentralization from what Meyer writes. Meyer (2009, pp. 457-58) writes that many education reforms of the past 25 years have involved the administrative decentralization of decision-making authority in education in the United States and worldwide. Decentralization experiments in New York City and Chicago, widespread adoption of site-based management or shared decision-making across many districts and states, and the emergence of relatively independent charter schools are all examples of efforts to strengthen education by placing greater rights and responsibilities in the hands of lower-level participants. However, many of these experiments were marred because decentralization meant different things to different people (Meyer 2009). Decentralization is a crucial example of the limitations that some scholars have called a "babbling equilibrium." A babbling equilibrium exists when interlocutors tolerate each other's use of critical terms despite patent ambiguities and fluctuating meanings. By using underdefined or semantically unstable words, social scientists contribute to the dulling of essential tools in their tool kits, settling for slogans where analysis is needed. Elinor Ostrom puts it: "All too often, slogan words, such as 'privatization,' 'centralization,' and 'decentralization,' are used as substitutes

for careful analysis" (2005, 181; cited from Meyer, 2009, pp. 457-58). In this context, this paper discusses the process of democracy and decentralization as reflected in the constitution and policy documents on school governance. It analyzes the practice of public school governance at the local level. This kind of research is essential because current educational policies and programs are formulated on the basis of democracy and decentralization in the federal context. However, the current situation of such procedures in practice is not assessed yet.

### **Understanding Decentralization**

Beginning from what is argued in the context Meyer (2009:458) further argues that decentralization is a concept that assumes a perplexing kaleidoscope of meanings unless its multidimensional contingencies are understood and specified. To that end, he first draws on recent theorizing in organizational research that suggests that the relationship between centralization and decentralization is more appropriately conceived as dialectical, not antagonistic. He reviews a few well-known examples of decentralization, showing how little ambiguities in design can produce significant differences in practice. Similarly, he identifies some of the main contingencies that need to be explicit when designing decentralized organizational structures in education. He ends his idea by discussing how mixing elements of

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centralization and decentralization can prevent some of the common fallacies of decentralization policy (Meyer, 2009). It means that overall decentralization features may not always apply in practice. We can observe some of the common fallacies of decentralization policies which may not result in what is assumed in a decentralized educational system. In educational policy's national and international vocabulary, decentralization has been the main entry for some time now, right next to such other favorites as participation, equality of opportunity, and reform. For a variety of reasons, the notion of decentralizing systems of education that have had rather heavily centralized structures of governance seems to command a great deal of attention in a wide range of settings (cf. Baumert & Goldschmidt, 1980; Bray, 1984; Guerra-Rodriguez, 1987; Kayashima, 1983; Kogan, 1979; Lauglo & McLean, 1985; McGinn & Street, 1986; P6ri6, 1987). This reflects in part a certain international "periodicity" in educational policy priorities; greater emphasis on equity and redistribution, for example, yields in time to greater preoccupation with quality and excellence, and periods of stronger beliefs in centralization are succeeded by heavy leanings towards decentralized modes of governance (cf. Lundgren, 1989, p. 12 as cited in Weiler, 1990, p. 433). Therefore, it is very much important to assess the educational policies and practices from decentralization perspectives and identify what gaps are their between formulated policies and actual practices taking place. Since the educational system of Nepal currently under procedure is shifting from a unitary state to federal state it requires careful attention and assessment of the policies and practices.

### ***Decentralization and Educational Governance***

In the discussions of decentralization in educational governance, one typically encounters one of three arguments: (a) the "redistribution" argument, which has to do with the sharing of power, (b) the "efficiency" argument, which is geared to enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the educational system through a more efficient deployment and management of resources, and (c) the "cultures of learning" argument, which emphasizes the decentralization of educational content. There are several variants of these three arguments both in the literature and in the educational policies of different countries (e.g., Lauglo & McLean, 1985, pp. 9-16; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1984, pp. 9-26). Occasionally, the three also become intertwined, at least at the level of policy rhetoric. However, they are predicated on three different rationalizations for decentralizing the governance of educational systems; they are meant to respond to various political and social dynamics and have other effects on the educational system and its environment (Weiler, 1990, p. 434). Thus, decentralized policies and practices must be assessed based on critical arguments on implementing decentralized educational procedures. The fundamental features of decentralization must be the basis for evaluating educational policies and their practices. However, one can observe different kinds of confusion on decentralization.

A significant source of confusion about decentralization is the most commonly used definition of the term. Centralization or decentralization is used conventionally to refer to the relationship between the government and the individual citizen. A centralized political system is one in which a central government holds most or all authority and power. A decentralized system is one in which control and management

have been shifted down a ladder of aggregation. Decentralization is a process of transferring or "devolving" power and authority from large to small governance units. The smallest unit is the individual citizen, the atom of society. Authors who (implicitly) use this definition end up with privatization or the doctrine of the free market and the "sovereignty of the individual consumer" as the ultimate in decentralization. Democracy is equated with individualism (McGinn and Street, 1986, pp. 471-72). It clearly states that the practice of decentralization can be observed and assessed at an individual level which is the root of democracy. While analyzing the pattern of decentralization, we need to follow the citizen-level participation in governance. One thing we can assume is that one can either find the practice of centralization or decentralization or hybrid as a feature of both. But centralization-decentralization can be seen as a continuum and a way to describe the locus of power of groups and organizations vis-a-vis the state. For that reason, we talk of centralization-decentralization as a single phenomenon, that is, as a dyadic relationship in which the elements have no meaning taken alone. As "the state" is the abstraction we use to refer to a coalition of ruling groups, this dyad represents the forces that characterize relationships and tensions between groups in society. As we will show, even governments of military dictatorships are not monolithic or unitary and are highly penetrated and influenced by different individuals and groups. (McGinn and Street, 1986, pp. 471-72). This kind of penetration can be observed in an educational system which is also essential to assess the participation of individuals and groups in school governance.

### ***Why Do "Governments" Seek to Decentralize?***

One of the central puzzles in the literature on decentralization is central governments' persistence in decentralization policies. This puzzle has two pieces to fit together. The first reason is why a unitary or monolithic government should want to decentralize, to give up power and authority. The academic argument from the uncritical perspective puts forward three motives: improving administration efficiency, increasing system effectiveness, and increasing local participation. The second reason why do governments persist in policies of decentralization if they fail to achieve the objectives set for them? One recent review of general decentralization policies begrudgingly points out that "no one has demonstrated conclusively that decentralization actually solves the problems noted earlier, or that it is necessarily more cost-effective than centralization (McGinn and Street, 1986, p. 72). However, we can observe both effective and ineffective implementation and results of decentralization in practice. Although the history of decentralization in Nepal is about 20 years, it has been new in the context of federalization. There is also debate on whether decentralization is an end or a means. This debate includes the role of government and the people.

The means and ends of a democratic government determine how the institutions of government function. Colombia initiated significant political and administrative decentralization reforms to facilitate the democratic process in the late 1980s (Hanson, 1995, p. 102). In some countries, people demand decentralization, whereas in some countries government implements the decentralization policy for reform. In the context of Nepal, it is not clear whether decentralization is the demand of people or the supply of government. However, in the context of federal Nepal, it can be regarded as

people's demand. Whatever form of decentralization is, it is now necessary to assess whether there is democratic decentralization in the educational system, particularly in school governance.

### ***Democracy, Decentralization, and Educational Practices***

There are positive and negative arguments on how decentralization affects the educational system. Implementing decentralization policies and programs in the educational system is shifting the educational system from one form to another. Decentralization policies that included the transference of educational services from national to provincial and local jurisdictions negatively affected educational quality because resources did not accompany the transfer. Educational institutions were significantly impacted in the following ways: (a) less investment in infrastructure and equipment, (b) lower salaries for educational personnel, (c) fewer resources for social welfare for families, and (d) new fiscal responsibilities at the local and provincial levels that the national administration previously supported, and (e) less accountability within the system for educational outcomes. In summary, the significant cutbacks in education and the increasing delegation of responsibility to the school and community level for acquiring resources and maintaining educational quality have resulted in less accountability throughout the system (PiniandCigliutti, 1999, pp. 97-98). However, this kind of consequence may not have resulted in the case of all countries throughout the world. Therefore, there are different discourses on this issue.

PiniandCigliutti (1999) discuss three discourses on educational reform. These three discourses (1999, pp. 197-98) are observed by Cigliutti (1993). He follows the existence of three distinct lessons that emanate from diverse sectors: The first is the Ministry of Education's political discourse, which calls for the democratization of educational institutions. The second discourse derives from parents and students. It focuses on the quality of the educational services they receive, and the third is a teacher discourse, which calls for improvements in work conditions, including salaries. According to Cigliutti, the lack of attention to the needs and priorities of teachers and families, along with broader economic policies that result in greater levels of social inequality, creates a paradox: Participation is called for to further democratic processes. At the same time, only those of higher socioeconomic levels can afford to participate (PiniandCigliutti 1999, p. 199). This is what we need to focus on while assessing the effects of decentralization in education in the context of Nepal because it has been implemented very recently, and the participation of people in decentralization is a gradual and continuous process. People gradually learn how to implement and practice policies and practices at the local level.

According to Piniand and Cigliutti (1999, p. 201), participation is a learning process requiring intermediate steps toward consolidating small gains. This is particularly true in countries like Argentina, where periods of democracy fail to get a foothold before being overtaken by military repression and reaction (PiniandCigliutti 1999). It indicates that the practice of decentralization in a democratic federal country differs from the authoritarian unitary government.

It is often assumed that large-scale policy changes need formal authority in legislation. Legislative mandates are often successful in implementing policy, especially when "goals ...

and their attainment are clear, there is a balance of public and professional support or neutrality for the change, and the target sites can feasibly achieve mandated ends" (Firestone & Corbett, 1988, p. 325). Decentralization in educational systems, however, differs from many other large-scale systemic changes because of its inherent complexity (Gibton and Goldring, 2001, p. 83). It is therefore required to assess and evaluate the practice of decentralization in the educational system in its framework. It would be more important to quote what Gibton and Goldring (2001) further write:

As decentralization affects the economics, organization, and cultural-political processes of educational systems, legislation plays an essential role in the issue of preserving equity and equality within a decentralized system. Miron and Nelson (2002), in their study on charter schools in Michigan, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, explained how charter school laws encouraged semi-privatization of a public school system where decentralization worked for the benefit of few strong groups, as in the case of Michigan, compared to Connecticut and Pennsylvania, where the laws ensured that many groups, including ethnic minorities, enjoyed the advantages of running their schools and emphasizing various cultures in the curriculum. (p. 84)

Thus, democracy and decentralization are closely interlinked. Decentralization has different dimensions which are closely associated with the practice of school governance at the local level. Therefore, democracy, decentralization, and school governance have a close connection. This connection needs to be analyzed in a particular socio-historical context of politics, the education system, and its management at various tiers; local, regional and central.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

The ideas we found in many kinds of literature reviewed showed that democracy and decentralization directly affect educational policy and planning. The form of government, democratic and dictatorship, and the state of the ruling, centralized and decentralized, shape educational policies and practices. Local level educational mechanisms follow the academic guidelines and programs framed by the government. In today's context, such local-level mechanisms are schools, community, and state mechanisms such as municipality or village council. These local units attempt to implement the educational policies and programs locally. Since Nepal has been a democratic federal republic country, it has recently adopted democratic and decentralized policies through local level institutions such as village councils and municipalities. Although the state has directed the regional body to restructure the local educational policies and practices, there are still many ambiguities in implementing education reform programs. Since democracy and decentralization directly affect academic policies and programs, this study raises several questions, such as whether Nepal has adopted democratic principles or norms and values while framing educational policies and programs. Whether the newly formulated policies and programs have been implemented at the local level? Whether the local level government mechanisms implement the academic policies and practices democratically and decentralized way? If the education system is democratically decentralized, what roles and responsibilities are the local level bodies, community, and other institutions playing for better educational policies and programs? How are community schools governed at the local

level? These fundamental research questions form the research problem as to whether the democracy and decentralization process and mechanisms directly affect educational policies and practices.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

The primary aim of this study is to explore the process of democratization and decentralization in educational policies and practices with a particular focus on community school governance at the local level. The specific objectives of this study are:

- To discuss the process of democratization and decentralization in the education system of Nepal,
- To explain the role of democratization and decentralization process in the educational policies and practices ongoing in Nepal,
- To explore the form and function of public schools governance at the local level in Nepal
- To examine the policy and practice gap in terms of public schools governance at the local level in different communities of Nepal

### ***Conceptual/Theoretical Framework of the Study***

In the previous section, the discussions on democracy, decentralization, and school governance have focused on various aspects. One important thing I found in the review is that in decentralization in educational management, one typically encounters one of three arguments: (a) the "redistribution" argument, which has to do with the sharing of power, and (b) the "efficiency" argument, which is geared to enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the educational system through a more efficient deployment and management of resources, and (c) the "cultures of learning" argument, which emphasizes the decentralization of educational content. I, therefore, adopt this frame to analyze the practice of decentralization at the local level. The assessment indicators will be developed and measured based on these criteria for analysis. In one piece of literature it is also said that decentralization is seen as a process of transferring or "devolving" power and authority from large to small governance units. The smallest unit is the individual citizen, the atom of society. Authors who (implicitly) use this definition end up with privatization or the doctrine of the free market and the "sovereignty of the individual consumer" as the ultimate in decentralization. Democracy is equated with individualism (McGinn and Street, 1986, pp. 471-72). The practice of decentralization can thus be understood as a process. It would also be another component of analysis in this research.

We also found another important idea in literature written by PiniandCigliutti (1999). They discuss three discourses on educational reform. These three discourses (1999, pp. 197-98) are observed by Cigliutti (1993). He observes the existence of three distinct discourses emanating from diverse sectors: The first is the Ministry of Education's political discourse, which calls for the democratization of educational institutions. The second discourse emanates from parents and students. It focuses on issues of the quality of the educational services they receive, and the third is a teacher discourse, which calls for improvements in work conditions, including salaries. According to Cigliutti, the lack of attention to the needs and priorities of teachers and families, along with broader

economic policies that result in greater levels of social inequality, creates a paradox: Participation is called for to further democratic processes. At the same time, only those of higher socioeconomic levels can afford to participate (PiniandCigliutti 1999, p. 199). I will also follow this model to analyze the decentralization practice in school governance at the local level. Finally, I will combine these three aspects of assessing and evaluating democracy, decentralization, and governance in the educational system of Nepal at the local level. Therefore, my study's conceptual/theoretical framework would be a synthesis of multiple frameworks developed by different authors.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to explore the process of democratization in the educational system of Nepal with particular focus on decentralization process. In addition, it also aims to explore the role of local level mechanisms; community and school management committees, in public schools governance. Therefore, the nature of this study is qualitative in nature. For this it follows the qualitative research design.

### ***Research Paradigm***

The nature of this study is qualitative in nature. It analyzes the contents on policy documents on the one hand and perception of stakeholders on educational policies and practice on school governance on the other. The analysis of results in this study will be thus interpretive. This approach believes on the subjective reality whether reflected in the text or expressed ideas of the people. As we understood there are multiple realities of social world. The things can be understood or perceived in different ways. Therefore things can only be explained through exploring and describing the multiple views of people reflected in text and voice. The current school governance policies, their practices and effectiveness will thus be explored through interviewing some informants and reviewing policy documents, SMC, teachers, students and parents are the major stakeholders of public school. Their role is very important for public school governance.

From the philosophical understanding in my study, I will capture the works of the participants and provide evidences of different perspective so, reality is subjective and multiple which will by my anthology (Creswell, 2007). The construction of knowledge through interaction of stakeholders of public school governance is essential to be explored here. I will participate in the research process with the view that the reality is subjectively constructed and interpreted. This process will be producing knowledge that is reflective of participant reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Thus the philosophical beliefs in the epistemology of this study will be that people construct their own understanding of reality. However, I will interpret the meaning of that constructed reality as reflected in the expression of stakeholders. While doing these things I will also collaborate and give more time in the field with participant as an insider and I will research at that part (Creswell, 2007) in order to explore the multiple realities on democratization, decentralization and schools governance at local level.

### ***Research methods***

As discussed in research paradigm the nature of this research will be qualitative. For this study, I will apply phenomenology

research method to generate primary data and necessary information. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method which focus on how people make meaning of their lived experience phenomenology seeks to what is the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon by an individual or by many individuals. Phenomenology is use in decision making process.

We will be going to the public and will be selecting a teacher by the purposive random sampling method. Similarly, we will select stakeholder of school member such as SMC member, head teacher and other teachers, PTA member by the purposive sampling method. In research process, we will develop data collection tools, which are very important for the purpose of data collection. In depth, interview, focus group discussion will be used in data collection process. There will be the main data collection method in this study.

#### **Nature and sources of data**

This study will explore and gather both primary and secondary data. Since the information on democratization and decentralization of education policies and practices it will review the available documents for necessary contents. All necessary available documents will be collected and reviewed in appropriate way.

#### **Selection Documents and Respondents**

Since this study uses both primary and secondary data will be collected from both primary and secondary sources. For the purpose of secondary data all the available policy documents on democratization and decentralization of educational policies and practices in the context of world as well as in Nepal. Similarly, some experts working on educational policies and programs will be selected purposively. These informants will be policy experts, educationist, teachers and community people. During the time of data collection it will be more specific.

#### **Method of Data Collection**

As mentioned earlier the contents on democracy, decentralization and educational policies and programs will be collected from the collection of policy documents and selection of informants. After selecting relevant texts and informants there will be two major ways of collecting data. The first way will be to review the collected texts intensively and pick up relevant contents thematically. The collection of these thematic contents will be the major data in this study. The second way will be to interview selected experts regarding educational policies and practices in terms of democratization and decentralization and public schools governance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Since this paper is prepared in the format of seminar paper I thought it would be better to write a conclusion section. The conclusion of this paper is basically focused on the conceptual and theoretical discussion the issue or topic and the methodological aspect of exploring the answer of research questions developed. The public school governance in terms of policies and practices is recently undergoing in new system in the context of democratization and decentralization process in federal republic Nepal. This new educational system particularly in schools governance is guided through constitutional provisions under federal democratic values and norms and assume the overall system including education

would democratically run and govern by the values of democracy and decentralization. The fundamental question is whether the public schools are governed democratically, in decentralized way through participatory democracy at local level as assumed in the constitution? In order to look for the answer of this questions relevant policy documents will be collected and analyzed. In addition, some representative sample public schools within Kathmandu valley will be purposively selected. Based on the documents/records available from policy documents and perception of stakeholders; teachers, members of school management committee, parent teacher association, students public school governance, generated through in-depth interviews in terms of policies and practices will be analyzed. The analysis will focus on the assessment of policies and practices of public school governance and identify the gaps between them.

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