DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF KENYAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Kenya has undertaken several educational reforms since independence in 1963. Several committees, commissions and task forces have been set up over the years with the mandate to make suitable recommendations on how to overcome the ever rising challenges facing the Kenyan education. The necessary legal and policy guidelines have also been prepared to guide the administration, management and governance of education, in line with the country's educational philosophy. The latest educational reform of 2005 was geared towards decentralization of education. For this paper, decentralization is limited to the transfer of decision-making authority to stakeholders at the secondary school level. This paper therefore gives a brief history of educational reforms in Kenya, discusses the challenges facing the Kenyan education, the concept of decentralization and the limitations of secondary schools to promoting it. Lastly, it makes recommendations on what should be done for secondary schools to fully embrace the concept of decentralization in Kenya.

Key words: *challenges, decentralization, democratization.*

Introduction

Prior to independence, the education system in Kenya was under the colonial government and missionaries. Reading and practical subjects were introduced to spread Christianity and prepare the indigenous African communities for blue and technical jobs. "*The colonial education system was based on a model of segregation, which saw the establishment of separate educational systems for Europeans, Asians and Africans, a factor that perpetuated inequalities in accessing education more so for the African population*" (Keriga & Bujra, 2009, p. 2).

Immediately after independence in 1963, Kenya took steps to restructure the education system, so as to align it to the national needs and the aspirations of the country. The concerns then were "*the training of more human resources to enhance economic development, equitable distribution of national income, and closer integration to bring national unity and address the national disparities*" (Ministry of Education, 1964, p. 16). The Kenya Education Commission (Ominde Commission) was therefore set up with the mandate to make recommendations for the most suitable education to meet the needs of the newly independent country (Republic of Kenya, 1964). The commission proposed an education system that would foster national unity and creation of sufficient human capital for national development. Despite this earlier restructuring, other national and educational challenges came up in subsequent years. Thus,

other commissions, committees and task forces were set up in order to address these challenges. Examples of these commissions and task forces include those chaired by (a) Gachathi (1976), which recommended the establishment of locally supported (Harambee) secondary schools to widen educational opportunities, (b) Mackay (1981), which recommended the establishment of a second university and the restructuring of education system to 8:4:4 (eight years of primary education, four years secondary and four for university education), (c) Kamunge (1988), which recommended cost sharing between the government, parents and communities, and (d) Koech (1999), which recommended on the totally integrated quality education and training (Institute of Policy Analysis and Research-IPAR, 2008). The findings of these commissions, committees and task forces have not been used as expected and recommendations have either been completely ignored or implemented only partially. Therefore, this paper was meant to discuss the challenges facing the Kenyan education, the concept of decentralization, limitations of secondary schools to promoting such education, and what needs to be done for schools to be fully decentralized.

Challenges Facing the Kenyan Education System

The current education system, the 8:4:4 was recommended by the Mackay commission (1981) and implemented by the government of Kenya in 1985. The following are the challenges that have faced the 8:4:4 system of education over the years:

- **Political interference:** Educational programming has been a major challenge to the current system of education in Kenya. At independence, Kenya placed great value on education and this could be witnessed by the many scholarships that were facilitated by the government for secondary and even higher education (IPAR, 2008). Today this is not the case, as the political class seems to have lost interest in education. This has consequently led to very inadequate funding. In fact during the last decade, research and development activities have received only 0.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (the total market value of all goods and services produced over a specific period of time in a country) funding from the government (Republic of Kenya, 2005).
- **Poor learning environment:** The current learning environment is so poor, so that children have no spare time to engage in activities that promote creativity, development of social skills and cognitive growth. In most schools, there is a widespread disrespect for teachers and the teaching profession, bullying and violence in the form of students' strikes, especially in secondary schools and colleges.
- **Weak early child development and education (ECDE) program:** Early childhood education is necessary for the acquisition of concepts, skills and attitudes that lay the foundation for lifelong learning. "Once a child fails to receive sufficient educational stimulation from those responsible for her or him in the vital early years, the lost ground is hard to be recovered" (IPAR, 2008, p. 4). In Kenya, the ECDE level faces severe coordination and financing challenges. There is a likelihood that the learning difficulties, socialization and problem- solving challenges facing a number of learners in the country, result from gaps created in the formative years, when important aspects in life, such as concept formation and socialization, should have been inculcated into learners.
- *Inadequate coverage of the school formal curriculum:* In some schools, colleges and even universities, the curriculum is not fully covered. Normal school programs are disrupted and learning time is wasted by shortage of teachers, students' riots, and recently political instability. Inadequate teaching and lack of learning facilities make the learners to be frequently idle and bored, making them highly irritable, and any little provocation of such students is likely to lead to violence. In many schools, *"whenever teachers are*

—agitating for industrial action on issues affecting their welfare, such as higher salaries students' violence does occur" (Siringi, 2000, p. 16).

- **Lack of appropriate counseling and career programmes in schools:** There is no appropriate policy, and no suitably experienced and qualified personnel for counseling and career guidance, and these programs in schools are not effective. There are many challenges facing students in Kenya, such as, HIV and Aids, drugs and substance abuse, societal violence, rapid urbanization and family breakdown, which will always require counseling to cope up with them (IPAR, 2008).

- **Poor employer motivation and poor administration:** The poor working environment has discouraged teachers from making efforts to improve student performance, and this affects students, who may vent their anger by destroying school property or even harming fellow students and teachers, just to attract the attention of the authorities. Teachers are generally demoralized, because of poor pay, mockery by other professionals and inhuman school working environment.

- *Autocracy in schools' governance:* Despite emphasis on democracy in the modern world, school administrators have remained autocratic in the way they manage their institutions. Schools look like isolated cases of autocratic leadership in an environment that is fast embracing democracy in managing public affairs (Sifuna, 2000). In many schools, students hardly have any opportunity to express themselves and, in extreme cases, they are treated as simple objects; hence, they are constantly looking for ways of releasing stress generated through continuous oppression in schools that do not allow any dialogue.

- **Poor school management practice:** Most members of the school management bodies, especially boards of governors (BOGs) and parent's teachers' association (PTAs), are not able to adequately monitor the daily activities of the school. It is worthy to note that "*some of these members do not have the basic skills to understand the dynamics of curriculum implementation, let alone school management*" (IPAR, 2008, p. 4). Some of the members, especially in primary schools, lack the basic literacy and are not able to firmly articulate management issues. In many schools, principals take advantage of the ignorance of these management boards to misappropriate school funds. Normally, students' reaction to cases of mismanagement of funds, usually in disguise of poor food, poor accommodation, inadequate sporting facilities and others, result to violence. There are also cases where parents and other stakeholders have held demonstrations against their schools' principals or the school management committees, because of mismanagement of funds.

- **Challenges within the school system especially in secondary schools in Kenya.** The context of school environment has changed so much and fast than the management can really comprehend (Fullan, 2003). Changes are experienced in the kind of students who join secondary schools, who are more enlightened about their rights by the mass media, human rights bodies, and the emergence of information technology. Teachers too are more knowledgeable and are more qualified staff than ever before. In many schools, where the principals have not embraced these changes, there have been conflicts and unnecessary tension, which in some cases result in violent behavior.

- **Search for democratization:** This is especially true for students, teachers and other interested parties, who want to play more active roles in school decision making than they have done before. The post election violence in Kenya in early 2008 has created a new lot of students in secondary schools, who are hardened and would go to any extent to ensure that their grievances are listened to. It is not uncommon to get students chanting *haki Yetu,* a kiswahili term meaning *our right,* an implication that they are able to differentiate their rights and privileges in school, and the kind of services they

should receive from them. Teachers too are bolder in pressuring for their grievances and demands to be heard, and met respectively.

As can be noted, the challenges that have faced the education system over the years are either political, governance or economic in nature. The students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders' reactions to these challenges have been strikes and demonstrations, as a way of communicating their grievances to the authorities. These challenges are not unique to Kenya, but they are common across the world. In order to address the challenges facing the 2:1:1 system of education, the government has over the years come up with legal and policy guidelines, which are meant to improve educational management and school governance. One of the most notable and current policy guideline is the transfer of decision-making authority to the stakeholders at the secondary school level. This is broadly referred to as decentralization of secondary education.

Decentralization of Education in Kenya

Decentralization refers to devolution of the centralized control of power and decision making from government into private initiatives at state, provincial, local government and school level (Bray, 1985; Uwakwe, Falaye, Emunemu & Adelore, 2008). It is also defined as the dispersal of decision-making power to the lower levels of an organization (Hannagan, 2004). Therefore, decentralization in education is to give authority for making important educational decisions at the school level to educational stakeholders (Head teachers, Teachers, Students, Parents and the community). The reasons for educational decentralization tend to be associated with four distinct objectives; democratization, regional or ethnic pressures, improved efficiency and enhanced quality of schooling. It is argued that "*the proponents of decentralization, who borrowed heavily from modern management in industrial and commercial organizations in the 1980's, believe that all stakeholders of schools should share the decision-making power at the school level*" (Samad, 2000, p. 187). In school based decision-making process, which functions under decentralization, the school is the major decision-making unit, ownership is the major requirement of school reform, and concerned members participate fully in decision making.

Many countries have reformed their educational systems, due to the repeated failure of centralized structures, to inspire the school personnel and foster the pre-requisite attitudes, opinions and behaviours that are necessary for generating educational improvements. It should be pointed out that "*a school improvement impetus and authority emanating from outside the school do not produce the responsibility and commitment necessary to sustain consequential improvement*" (Majkowski & Fleming, 1988, p. 2). Under external control management, school members have little autonomy or commitment, because the administrators make decisions without involving them. Decentralization promotes democratization in the education sector, and gives broad opportunities for educational stakeholders in schools to participate in the management of educational programs, and, to a great extent, eases the central government burdens (Indriyanto, 2005). The rationale for decentralization of education in many countries (Samad, 2000) is based on the following:

1. The school is the primary unit of change
2. Those who work directly with the students have the most informed and credible opinions, regarding what educational arrangements will most benefit those students.
3. Significant and lasting improvements take considerable time, and local schools are in the best position to sustain improvement efforts over time.
4. The school principal is a key figure for school improvement
5. Significant change is brought about by students, staff and community participation

— in project planning and implementation

6. Decentralization supports the professionalism of the teaching profession and vice-versa, which can lead to more desirable outcomes.

7. Decentralization structures keep the focus on schooling where it belongs - on achievement and other students' outcomes.

8. Alignment between budgets and instructional priorities improves under decentralized systems.

There is growing evidence that more inputs are not enough to make schools work better. One important reason why education systems are failing to provide children with solid education is the weak accountability relationships among policy makers, education providers, and the citizens and students whom they serve. It is not surprising then that the transfer of some decision-making power to stakeholders has become a popular reform over the past decade (Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibanez, 2009, p. 1).

In the United Kingdom, educational reforms began in the mid-1980s (Samad, 2000). These reforms combined both decentralization of management and decision making in schools, and stronger centralization of control over curricula and the monitoring of educational standards. In the United States of America, the approach to educational reforms has been more piecemeal and decentralized. This could be attributed to the fact that delivery of educational services is placed upon the local governments unlike the situation in the UK where the delivery of educational services lies upon the national government. In Malaysia, schools have *"shifted from a traditional centralized system of education to a relatively decentralized system of self managing or school-based management to develop school initiatives and meet changing needs since the early 1990's"* (Samad, 2000, p. 183). In Indonesia, the idea of decentralization was introduced in 1974. However in practice, the mission of the decentralization, which has been introduced, is merely a political rhetoric or as other people would call it, 'decentralization centralism' governance (Indriyanto, 2005).

Prior to decentralization of education in Kenya, major decisions pertaining to daily secondary school activities were made at the Ministry of Education headquarters and very little by the principals and boards of governors (BOGs) at school level. The BOGs, whose secretary is always the principal, had been delegated some power by the minister for education, as stipulated in the Education Act of 1968 (Republic of Kenya, 1968). After decentralization in 2005, decision making on issues relating to policy development, quality assurance and standards, curriculum design and overall responsibility falls under the Ministry of Education. Issues relating to day-to-day operations, local supervision and resource mobilization to support education and training, as well as counseling students and staff, have been decentralized and allocated to local stakeholders at the districts and schools, both with backstopping services from the ministry and other national level actors (Ministry of Education, 2005). The source of decision making has been widened, and all the educational stakeholders in secondary schools are supposed to be active participants in making decisions at school level. In the decentralized secondary school system, the principal's role is expected to change from that of the 'boss' to that of a 'chief executive officer.' Instead of enforcing the ministry of education policies, which is the role of the principal as the 'boss,' the principal 'chief executive' works with all stakeholders and shares with them the decision-making authority. All decisions in management task areas within the school level are supposed to be shared among all the stakeholders. This is in an effort to overcome the different challenges and a way of democratizing other public entities. Decentralized decision making, when effectively implemented, results in higher student performance, more efficient use of resources, and increased skills. Other benefits are satisfaction in school administrators, teachers and students, and the greater involvement of the community and business for supporting schools.

In a decentralized system of decision making, stakeholders are expected to participate

personally or through representation by democratically elected representatives. In Kenya, there have been attempts to empower secondary school students through their representatives, by sensitizing them on their roles and other efforts to reform students' leadership from prefects to students' councils. Teachers and school management boards have been 'empowered' through capacity building in various aspects of management. Head teachers, in both primary schools and secondary schools, have been sensitized and trained to act as facilitators of participatory decision making. However despite all these efforts to reform the education sector through decentralization, problems of secondary school strikes and demonstrations, which are the students' and other stakeholders' reactions to the challenges, seem to be on the rise.

Limitations of Secondary Schools to Full Decentralization

As pointed out earlier, in a decentralized school system, stakeholders are supposed to be active participants in decision making on various management tasks in their schools. However, this seems not to be the case in Kenyan secondary schools. Some of the limitations to effective decentralization of education in Kenyan secondary schools include:

Conflicting Legal and Policy Guidelines

The Education Act of 1968, which is the fundamental law governing education in Kenya, mandates the Minister for Education to delegate power to appointed boards of governors (BOGs) who have the responsibility to manage secondary schools. Over the years, this is the legal document that has empowered BOGs and the head teachers (who are the secretaries to the BOGs) to make decisions in all aspects of school management. Due to the incompetence of the BOGs, they make at times very unpopular decisions, which may be contested by other stakeholders, such as, parents, students and teachers, often in form of demonstrations and strikes. Some of the head teachers take advantage of the incompetence and ignorance of the BOG members to embezzle school funds. Decentralization of education in Kenya is governed through the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 on Policy Framework for Education, Training and Research. The Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005 was adopted through a sector wide approach to programme planning (SWAP). SWAP is a process of engaging all stakeholders in education in order to attain national ownership, alignment of objectives, harmonization of procedures and approaches, and a coherent financing arrangement (Manani, 2007). The Sessional Paper No. 1 recommended, among other things, the devolution of education to the districts and decentralization of decision making to the school level (Ministry of Education, 2005). Then, there is the Public Procurement and Disposal Act of 2005, which was implemented on the 1st of January, 2007 (Republic of Kenya, 2005). The Public Procurement and Disposal Act of 2005 was aimed at enhancing openness, transparency, fairness, good governance and reduction in corruption in public institutions, including schools. The Act granted teachers the power to control the tendering and procurement process in secondary schools (Wanderi, 2008). It is through this Act that ordinary teachers were mandated to be members and even chair tendering and procurement committees, and generally make decisions for the secondary school financial management. These legal and policy documents are concurrently applied in secondary school administration and management in Kenya. It remains a matter of choice for the administrators to decide on which is the more appropriate and favourable way to act at a given time.

Students' Governance

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been ratified by the government of Kenya, gives young people rights on a wide range of issues

including "*the right to education, the right to be free from violence, exploitation and abuse, the right to food and shelter, the right to play, and the right to have their voice heard on issues, which affect them*" (Initiative Africa, 2003, p. 16). Students' involvement in decision making is likely to lead to better decisions, to strengthen a commitment to and understanding of democracy and better protect students. A study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the ministry of education in Kenya in 2006 revealed that student participation in the daily running of the school was directly linked to better academic performance and less school strikes (Karanja, 2010). It is out of these benefits and pressures that the government through the policy on decentralization ought to involve students in decision making. Students are not just the beneficiaries of the school programmes, but they are co-interested parties in raising the quality of their academic programmes.

A major limitation for effective and meaningful students' participation in decision making has been the lack of appropriate structures. The students' councils are the governing structures established in secondary schools, where students have been given a voice to make decisions and be heard. In Kenya, there is no however clear policy on students' representation; therefore, most of the schools are likely to have the colonial prefects system, where the members are appointed by teachers. Most African countries inherited authoritarian school structures, through systems that encouraged unquestioning loyalty to authority (Sifuna, 2000). "*The colonial state in Africa did not only want an 'educated native,' but a 'loyal educated native as well'* (Sifuna, 2000, p. 221). One aspect of the inherited school structure and organization that has been heavily criticized as contravening democratic values is the existence of the prefect system. Most secondary schools in English speaking African countries "*have some form of prefect system, where the duty of the prefects normally is to act as general agents of social control, checking lateness, reporting misbehavior to teachers, organizing the tidiness of the school compound, and generally acting as messengers of the staff*" (Sifuna, 2000, p. 222). In most cases, prefects are appointed by the school administration, usually a small group comprising the principal, his assistant, the dean, the discipline master and few other teachers. Thus, the prefect system is aimed at satisfying the authorities rather than the student population. In several studies done on students' governance in Kenya, it was found that the prefect system is the main structure used in students' participation in decision making in Kenya, while teachers include students in decision making to mainly encourage compliance (Jwan & Ongondo, 2000; Ouma, 2007). It was also found out that student leaders were often handpicked by teachers, and this resulted to resentment in the rest of the school body (Kenya Female Advisory Organization, 2003). In a democratic and participatory school management, there should be in a school a students' council consisting of representatives from all classes, who should be elected by students themselves. In any school, an effective students' council should have an "*executive committee with an elected president and vice president and its function should be to organize co-curricular, cultural and social activities within the school*" (Chaube & Chaube, 1995, p. 196).

During the second national secondary student leaders' conference in 2010, it was reported that from then on, students would be consulted when important school decisions were being made in schools. Commenting on this proposed change, the vice president of Kenya, Hon. Kalonzo Musyoka, applauded the bold move to engage students in school governance. He further said that "*when student leaders in particular, and students in general, participate in decision-making, they feel valued*" (Muindi, 2010, p. 4).

Financial Management Skills

For effective decentralization of decision making and services, the government came up with the Public Procurement and Disposal Act of 2005. This Act empowers other stakeholders (other than the chief executives and the organizational boards) to participate in making decisions

pertaining to tender and the procurement of goods and services (Republic of Kenya, 2005). The Public Procurement and Disposal Regulations, 2006 (Legal Notice No.174) gives the composition of the tender committees in secondary schools as: the deputy head teacher as the chairman, the deputy chairman as the officer in-charge of finance, at least six heads of department or teaching staff, including the matron or officer in-charge of boarding facilities appointed by the principal, while the secretary is the officer heading the procurement unit (Republic of Kenya, 2006). The procurement committee has a membership of six, and among them at least three teachers should be included. The regulations clearly state that all these members of the committee must be appointed in writing by the principal. Therefore, the principal plays a crucial role in determining who should become member of these committees, and, except in a few cases where it is dictated by the regulations, he/she can easily appoint people whom he can easily manipulate. Again, most of these committee members do not have the basic skills on finance, procurement and tendering procedures. It has been found out that head teachers of secondary schools in Kenya have inadequate knowledge of policies and regulations regarding finance and budgeting (Okech, 2005). Teachers and other stakeholders may be the worst members, since there has not been any serious emphasis on financial management during any training of teachers in Kenyan universities and colleges.

What Needs to Be Done?

1. Unless the legal and policy documents are harmonized to make up one comprehensive document regarding a decentralized educational management, it may not be very easy to fully and effectively decentralize the secondary school education in Kenya. Some stakeholders, especially head teachers and BOGs in secondary schools, are likely to cling on to the Educational Act of 1968, which gives them mandate to make some important decisions in secondary school governance. Some corrupted head teachers may not want to easily give up their active role in making decisions on tendering and procurement, since this may be a lucrative source of their 'deals' and some personal benefits. A legal document, probably to replace the Education Act of 1968, would be very appropriate (since it cannot be easily legally challenged), unlike policy documents, which can easily be legally challenged. A comprehensive legal document should be aligned with democratic governance, decentralization of decision making and services, and should also embrace information technology as a tool for instruction and administration amongst other things.

2. Students should be practically involved in decision making through democratically elected students' councils. The introduction of the students' council might help Kenyan democracy in the long run by teaching the students a few things about civic duty and peaceful competition for elected office. This is also likely to inculcate into the students the virtues of political competition at an early age, which might help reduce cases of violence in elections for students' body representative at Kenyan universities. If students are involved in decision making, they are likely to support and own any decisions and ideas, which will in the long-term be beneficial to the school.

3. The role and capacity of the stakeholders should be well defined and developed, respectively. All the stakeholders need to be trained on their role in a decentralized system. Teachers should acquire the necessary skills and attitudes through induction and re-training and, where possible, some skills such as financial management should be emphasized on during training in colleges and universities.

4. The ministry of education headquarters should thoroughly play its role in decentralization especially on policy development, and quality assurance and standards. Where possible, the ministry can occasionally contract independent auditors to reduce collusion that sometimes take place between some corrupted head teachers and the auditors of the ministry of education.

Conclusions

The Kenya government has a noble idea and plan of education decentralization in the 21st century, which is aligned to democracy, openness and transparency in all the public institutions in the country. Transfer of decision making to secondary schools (decentralization), when effectively implemented can result to higher student performance, more efficient use of resources, increased skills and greater community support for the school. Many countries have tried to decentralize their education, with the hope of reaping the benefits associated with it, but, due to many limitations, they have not succeeded. Kenya has not been spared of these limitations, and the country should strive to overcome any limitations towards effective decentralization, especially in secondary schools, so that it may enjoy such benefits.

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