Centralised and Decentralised Education: With the British Local Educational Authorities as the Representative of the Unfolding Discussion

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Abstract: In today's globalised and knowledge-based society, countries across the world are increasingly adopting different models to structure and organise their education systems. More subtly, countries are transitioning from centralised education systems to decentralised ones to create more local stakeholder influence on schools. England, which is known for self-managing schools, is a case in point. Striking an appropriate balance between centralisation and decentralisation remains a challenge, however. In this regard, this study sought to explore the innovative approaches of educational decentralisation in British local educational authorities and the challenges facing them, as well as the strategies adopted by British local educational authorities to overcome these challenges so as to provide reference to other countries. Desk-based research was used for data collection. The findings suggest that although a centralised education system is praised for reducing inequalities and standardisation, it often fails to reflect the specific needs of learners because the system is not school-led. On the other hand, a decentralised educational system is preferred in England for many reasons, including better information and targeting, greater voice and participation, innovative and creative approaches, and improved efficiency and strengthened accountability relationships. Despite this, however, it may encourage social inequalities, in addition to being captive of some elite groups or special interest groups. England adopts devolution as its approach to educational decentralisation. In addition to this general approach, school-based management is particularly used to empower local educators, students, and parents. However, the country's education system is littered with educational inequalities. The system can also be captive of elite groups.

Keywords: centralised education, decentralised education, education system, educational authorities

1. Introduction

In today's globalised and knowledge-based society, countries across the world are increasingly adopting different models to structure and organise their education systems. European higher education has transformed from a centralised education system to a more decentralised one regarding the hiring of staff, determination of curriculum, and the autonomous administration of the state-provided lump amount. Turner points out that in England, the education system has undergone

reforms and developments since the 1980s comparable to those occurring place in the larger western world [1]. After the reforms of the 1980s, more than 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were incapable of implement and execute their own policies [1]. For example, schools and not LEAs were now given financial responsibility, as well as, the responsibility to hire and fire teachers. In many parts of England, however, people exclaim that the country cannot run an educational system as a business. Those who subscribe to this line of thought suggest that there should be an authority that attempts to equalise and almost in the socialist sort of fashion, and sure that there is an even development for all schools, and not that one school can be better. A systematic review of education studies in relation to decentralised education systems seems to be lacking. Nevertheless, as Lo and Gu assert, an effective and efficient education management system needs to strike an appropriate balance between decentralisation and centralisation, both bottom-up and top-down approaches, for a more inclusive system [2]. However, how to strike this balance is a question of debate.

Concerning the above, the primary purpose of this article is to explore the innovative approaches of educational decentralisation in British local educational authorities and the challenges facing them, as well as the strategies adopted by British local educational authorities to overcome these challenges to provide reference to other countries. Specifically, the study is guided by the following three objectives:

    i.   Compare the advantages and disadvantages of centralised and decentralised education, to identify the motivations of transferring to decentralised education in British;

   ii.   To analyse the innovative approaches of educational decentralisation in British local educational authorities.

  iii.   To find the challenges facing the decentralised education in British local educational authorities and the strategies adopted to overcome these challenges.

Although many studies have analysed the impact of both education decentralisation and centralisation on the management and progress of the educational sectors of different countries, few studies have sought to establish how best to strike a balance between decentralised and centralised decision-making in the same regard.

One of the advantages of a centralised education system is that it enhances equity by reducing social disparities [3]. Another advantage of a centralised education system is that it develops uniformity in the administration of the education system, leading to the standardisation of the curriculum [3]. Despite this, however, Saiti and his colleague Eliophotou-Menon examined the decision-making procedure of the centralised education system in Greece and found that only a few groups of bureaucrats control policy proposals for educational reform [4]. This, according to Saiti and fellow researchers, resulting in judgments that do not represent the interests of many stakeholders or the demands of society as a whole [4].

With regard to educational decentralisation, Qian and Verhoeven examined China's transition from centralised education to decentralised one [5]. They found that senior government officials and policymakers were motivated to transfer from a centralised education system to a decentralised one because they saw the latter as the means for ensuring a more comprehensive representation of legitimate interests, primarily those of public-school stakeholders. Other researchers such as Prawda have demonstrated that the motivation to transfer a centralised education system to a decentralised one in Latin America is that a decentralised system gives beneficiaries more control over education [6]. Decentralised education systems can help save money through improved management efficiency, which alleviates the state's financial burden. However, decentralisation can also lead to problems like increasing disparities between schools, cities, districts and regions, as seen in China [7].

While decentralisation comes in various forms, such as delegation, devolution, deconcentrating, and decoupling, approaches to educational decentralisation are grouped into two categories. Lo and Gu drew on the globalisation theory to analyse the school governance reforms in South Korea and

Taiwan in the context of democratisation [2]. They found that the two main approaches to educational decentralisation are societal decentralisation and managerial decentralisation, by conceptualising their rationales context and policy instruments [2]. This classification agrees with Leung, who identified school-based management in Hong Kong as a managerial restructuring meant to tighten the control of the aided school sector [8]. Managerial decentralisation arose from the context of globalisation and the development of a knowledge-based economy, both of which lead to the rise of managerialism [2]. Primary concerns under managerial decentralisation are global trends related to education such as managerial efficiency and effectiveness [2]. A major policy instrument under this approach is horizontal decentralisation, essentially decentralising from one organisation to another. Societal decentralisation arose within the context of democratisation, better referred to as the maturation of civil society. Primary concerns under this approach are widened access, responsibility and accountability, funding, and quality [6]. A major policy instrument under this approach is vertical decentralisation, which means decentralisation from organisations to individuals and then to their representative organisations [2]. Educational decentralisation can take the form of different initiatives. For example, Hanson's study found that in Argentina and military regimes ruled Chile in the 1970s, the decentralisation initiative took the form of arbitrary exercises of coercive power [9]. On the other hand, Spain in 1978 after the death of General Franco implemented carefully planned actions inspired by political intent at the national level, as pointed out by Hanson [9].

One of the issues with educational decentralisation, and with specific reference to Bray, is that it may encourage regional inequalities [3]. This is because national officials have no power to extract human and financial resources from resource-rich areas and then redistribute them to poorly endowed ones. Moreover, educational decentralisation may facilitate more local loyalty to regional identities than national ones. Although this may encourage more independence from the central government, it may simultaneously put national integrity itself at risk. Major barriers to educational centralisation often come in the political form more than technical or even financial ones, though they interrelate. A decentralised educational reform is, all too often, identified with a particular centre of power like a political party, institution, or individual. This makes it difficult to generate far-reaching and sustained support, according to Hanson [9]. Towards this direction, one year later, Hanson suggested various strategies that countries could use to overcome these challenges [10]. Another strategy suggested by Hanson would be to implement school-based management to empower instructors and parents in the community, as was the case in China, and Nicaragua in 1994. A government, with specific reference to Colombia in 1991, can also revise the way the education ministry makes decisions at higher echelons of the system.

This article will focus on comparative analysis and case studies to deeply analyse the success of the decentralised education represented by England and how would it inspires other countries. Consistent with the public choice theory in education, one of the logical thinking of this study is that people will be more motivated to participate in planning and to implement education programs if they are actively involved in such programs, as pointed out by Rodden [11]. Additionally, in line with Thomas Bossert's decision space framework, the central government should give space to local authorities so that they can make decisions and identify and prioritise those services they deem essential for economic development, and in this case school development [12].

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

First, in terms of research design, This study adopts a secondary data research design. This means that data is obtained from other sources not originally compiled by the researcher [13]. A vital advantage of this research design is that it takes a relatively lesser period of time to gather the relevant

data. This is different from primary research design which involves multiple steps including seeking the consent of participants before proceeding with a study.

From the various research strategies available, this study adopted a case study strategy. This study used the single case of the British educational system to draw data, generate findings and make conclusions. The case study strategy is particularly important when research seeks to obtain very specific and detailed information about a research phenomenon [14]. Limiting the scope of the study to one single case created sufficient room and time for the research to dig deeper and find more in-depth data on the administration and management of the decentralised British education system.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In data collection, this research used the desk research method to collect data. Data was collected from multiple sources, including consortium reports, government reports, online newspapers, and credible blogs. To ensure currency of information, only data not older than 5 years ago was utilised. To collect data, the research conducted multiple Boolean searches in order to collect relevant data. In this sense the research will use a combination of key words such as 'Decentralised education' AND 'British', 'Centralised education' AND 'Europe', and 'Disadvantages' OR 'advantages' AND 'Education system in UK/Europe'.

With regard to data analysis, this study utilised the thematic data analysis method. The research objectives were utilised as the overarching or main themes and subsequently, subthemes were generated under each main theme [14]. To conduct deeper analysis, the research discussed findings and analysed them against findings of existing studies.

3. Result

3.1. The Decentralised Education of England

A centralised education system is praised for reducing inequalities. In other words, the national government has the power to extract human and financial resources from resource-rich regions and then subsequently redistribute them to regions with poor resource endowment. In addition to this, under a centralised education system, national governing authorities can standardise the capabilities and national levels of achievement like national tests, for instance. While for some this is an advantage of this system, others such as the former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, see it as a disadvantage. Clegg, while criticising in 2008 what he termed as Britain's centralised' education system, particularly the national curriculum exams, said that it was time for the country to put an end to its one size fits all approach to education, as quoted by the Independent's Richard Garner [15]. For him, England's regime of national curriculum tests and objectives are based on the need to assess schools than on the individual requirements of students [15]. It is, therefore, deducible that a centralised education system often comes with programs that do not respond to the specific needs of learners because the system is not school-led. Under the system, teachers have no, little if any, with learners.

One of the motivating factors behind England's transition from a centralised education system to a decentralised one is better information and targeting. Under a decentralised system, local authorities have a more institutionalised link with beneficiary communities, better information flow, and the incentive to put such information. This is evident in the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership, a strategic partnership between the local authority and schools to support school management to better understand complicated problems and subsequently come up with collection solutions via the exchange of pertinent information and knowledge, according to a 2014 report by England's Department for Education [16]. Besides, having many education suppliers through more decentralised systems can lead to vast experience and innovation and increased competition amongst

sub-national authorities. Although critics allege that arts and culture, which are ingredients for creativity and innovation, are being 'systematically' eliminated from England's education system through arts cuts, former school standards Minister Nick Gibb presents evidence that suggests otherwise. While responding to a parliamentary inquiry from Labour, the Guardian's Sally Weale reports that Gibb said the government, especially through the school-led curriculum, values and supported the creative arts throughout England's education system [17]. According to Gibb, the government has invested about £620m between 2016 and 2021 in a wide range of arts and music education programs, in addition to funding for schools, to ensure that high-quality education in arts and music is accessible to all children whatever their background. Another advantage of a decentralised education system is improved efficiency. This directly speaks to how educational resources, be they financial or otherwise, are put into use. England's decentralised system leads to more efficiency by removing bureaucratic procedures, in addition to motivating LEAs to be accountable to service users for resource allocation.

Moreover, decentralised education systems give greater voice and participation. In England, for example, parent power epitomised through parent governors elected by parents has been promoted as a solution to educational problems, according to the Department for Education [18]. Furthermore, decentralised systems strengthen accountability relationships. However, despite these advantages, decentralised education systems can face equity issues when poorly managed. England is yet to record improvement in the school attainment gap for two decades, according to a recent report by Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Research, a think-tank. As Financial Times' Bethan Staton reports, numeracy, and literacy in almost all OECD countries have been considerably higher among those between the age bracket 16 and 24 years than have those aged between 55 and 65 years [19]. In England, however, they have been roughly identical. Likewise, the Institute for Fiscal Research report established that the English education system still leaves poor children behind despite decades of policy focus [19].

3.2. Innovative Approaches of Educational Decentralisation in England

Although there are many innovative approaches to implementing a decentralised education system, England's took the form of devolution. Devolution, which the UK government's education secretary Nadhim Zahawi considers the most potent form of decentralisation, has seen England permanently transfer authority over administrative, pedagogical, and financial matters from higher to lower levels of government. Starting 1979 all through to 1997, the Conservative administrations introduced several new education policy frameworks that were largely shaped by the neoliberal ideas of the 'New Right.' According to the National Archives, for example, the Education Act of 1980 placed more attention on parental choice of school [20]. Apart from a national curriculum, the Act also introduced a testing program. Schools were required under the same Act to admit learners up to their physical capacity, and the schools were largely made depends on the number of students enrolled, schools allocate resources and not LEAs, managing budgetary allocations, including hiring and firing teachers. This policy instrument saw the emergence of a 'quasi-market, and alongside the publication of public examination results as well as national public scores, worked to promote a competitive market in school-based education in which schools compete for pupils and hence money. It can be inferred that England's education system is largely devolved with the LEAs providing and overseeing the organisation of public education in the area under their jurisdiction.

3.3. Challenges Facing the Decentralised Education in England and the Strategies Adopted to Overcome these Challenges

England's decentralised education system has increased not just autonomy, but also competition for pupils and money. This may increase differences between schools and educational outcomes, and ultimately social inequalities. In this regard, England is attempting to address this issue by introducing national standards for education services. For example, Education Secretary Zahawi set out in the School White Paper, published in March 2022, government plans for schools to either have become academies by 2030 or be in the process of joining a multi-academy trust by this date. As the Independent's Catherine Lough reports, these baseline requirements are stipulated in the Schools Bill [21]. In Birmingham, Mr Zahawi addressed the Confederation of School Trusts' annual conference where he said that the Bill is part of the government's agenda to level up, adding that the government will not accept that some regions of the nation are consistently left behind [21]. This call came after the covid-19 highlighted the benefits of the trust model, as strong families of schools were able to weather Covid-19 storms more effectively than standalone schools.

Another issue facing England's education system is that special interests, especially multi-academy trusts, capture local institutions. A 2014 research report by Education Select Committee found that multi-academy trusts, despite receiving public funds, show little transparency on how and on what they spend these funds, and were engaged in financial mismanagement [22]. These trusts are so powerful that they even pilled pressure on Mr Zahawi to make a U-turn on the schools' bill after criticism over the bill's attempt to increase the Department for Education's control of academy trusts, as the move was seen as an attempt to centralise power in Whitehall [23]. Another way that decentralisation could give special interest groups a leeway to capture local institutions and even game the system is through what is today known as the Trojan Horse affair over the influence of extremist ideology in Birmingham schools. This involved claims that there was a conspiracy by hardline Islamist teachers and governors to take over schools in predominantly Muslim areas of Birmingham. During an investigation of the select education committee, BBC News' Sean Coughlan reports, Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw said that governors over-stepped their bounds and harassed and undermined school administrators [24]. He added that England schools have depended on using amateurish administration to perform a professional job and suggested that governors should be paid to inject more professional governance. To this end, it is deducible that the decision to run the fragmented English education system directly from the Department for Education without any local implementation and oversight, or what think-tank Compass describes as a democratic middle tier, seems to have been a miscalculation or a bad idea [25].

4. Discussion

4.1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Centralised and Decentralised Education

Although a centralised system reduces social inequalities through resource distribution, a centralised education system ignores the individual needs of learners. Regarding reducing inequalities, a centralised system allows national authorities to get resources, be it financial or otherwise, from resource-rich regions and then redistribute them to poorly endowed regions for better educational attainment. This, according to Bray, is more difficult to achieve under decentralised systems [3]. Equitable resource distribution under centralised education systems is important to ensuring school readiness, especially for children from less advantaged families. This finding is in line with that of Roos and fellow researchers who found that among all children whose families had collected social assistance payments for two years in Manitoba; only 12% passed standardised writing tests, relative to 89% of all other children [26]. Along the same vein, a centralised education system is praised for

having unified and standardised curricula. This means homogeneous learning objectives and priorities across the country, reducing regional educational attainment and proficiency disparities. However, a centralised education system can stifle creativity and innovation through its one-size-fits approaches that undermine the academic freedom of instructors, teachers, administrators, and learners. This, in return, limits their ability to serve the needs of their local communities. Furthermore, because decisions are not school-led under a centralised education system, such decisions are often less responsive to the needs of the individual.

On the other hand, supporters of decentralised ones like them for their ability to improve quality and subsequently satisfy local demand because of having better information regarding local needs. In England, the authorities were motivated to transition from a centralised education system to a decentralised one to institutionally position LEAs with local communities and improve information flow between service providers and users. Here, LEAs serve as a conduit through national policy traverses, as they are not only expected to implement such policy but also to monitor functions on school-level performance. The reason being that LEAs are better placed to respect local social identities, identify needs and more efficiently respond to local variations in conditions, standards, tastes, local requirements, and affordability for infrastructure or services. Perhaps most importantly, a decentralised education system recognises the importance of enabling beneficiary communities and civil society to actively engage with educational problems at the school level for the sake of improving education quality. In England, the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership is such a strategic alliance between the local authority and schools designed to support school management to understand complicated issues better and subsequently come up with collection solutions by sharing the right expertise and information. This finding is consistent with the results of Sheldon and Epstein's research, which found that active involvement in community and family participation reduces chronic absenteeism rates [27]. A wide range of involvement activities is used to this effect, including connecting chronically absent students with community mentors, communicating with parents about families regarding student attendance, and celebrating successful school attendance with children and their families. By implementing these participation activities, schools may enable more community partners and encourage support, and monitor student attendance.

Educational decentralisation also leads to innovative and creative approaches as learning is not tied to the predetermined curriculum but one in which learners, guided by their teachers, are allowed to explore ideas. Although previous studies such as Moate et al. have found a positive relationship between a decentralised education system and innovation, the current study's findings are unique in the sense that they go deeper to show how England is using arts, music, and culture to promote innovation [28]. Moreover, like Busemeyer, this study corroborates the assertion that decentralised education systems improve efficiency because of the increased competition among localities [29]. These systems create smaller and more flexible units that help in overcoming the bureaucracy and inertia associated with larger systems. Under these systems, local communities are actively engaged in raising issues with educational providers and promoting accountability of provision. In a centralised system, decisions are often made outside and far away from the location of the actual issues. Trusting and allowing the more informed LEAs, as they listen to local communities' voices, to make resource allocation decisions results in better efficiency. However, since decentralisation results in increased competition and autonomy, it may intensify the differences between schools and academic, and in the long-term, social inequalities. Additionally, elite groups or special interest groups can also capture local institutions to force their interests.

4.2. Innovative Approaches of Educational Decentralisation by British Local Educational Authorities

England adopts devolution as its approach to educational decentralisation. Under this approach, the country has transferred authority and most of the real responsibilities to the school level. This devolution approach to decentralisation is often advocated for on the basis that they enable schools to shape their own directions. Consistent with this line of thought, Gamage and Zajda assert that it is only logical to assume that the local community, parents, school leaders, and teachers who are closest to students are the best placed to come up with strategic approaches that accommodate the specific requirements of their pupils [29]. England thus uses school-based management or school-based governance approach [9]. In short, as Lo and Gu had long established, countries such as England with self-managing schools reflect managerial decentralisation, which is characterised by a less arbitrary and interventionist state [2]. This is in line with Thomas Bossert's Decision Space framework, which requires the national authorities to give space for schools to prioritise their needs. At the same time, the state retains its influence over policymaking using indirect governance procedures [12]. Devolving authority in crucial decision-making areas such as staffing, and finance empowers schools and improves learner outcomes. Previous studies, including Eacott, have also underscored the assertion that liberating schools through devolution allow schools to implement student-centred programs that ultimately improve their educational outcomes [30]. This sits well with the Public Choice theory in education because when schools will be more motivated to participate in planning and implementing education programs if they are actively involved in such programs because such programs directly address their specific needs [11].

4.3. Challenges and the Strategies Adopted to Overcome these Challenges

With the increased competition under centralised education systems, social inequalities are bound to happen due to differences in educational outcomes. This explains why England introduced national standards for education services in an attempt to address educational inequalities. The new Schools Bill is, for instance, aimed at boosting education standards across England, spreading opportunity, levelling up the country, and ultimately boosting the country's economy. Unlike England, as demonstrated by Herbst and Wojciuk, other countries such as Poland may resort to redistributing resources in a bid to neutralise the impacts of uneven local taxes [31]. However, England's move to introduce a new legal tool for standards for academy trusts is the right move as it replaces disparate standards agreed with each trust at the point it was created so that parents will know in advance what they expect for their children. Further underpinning this point is Wilkinson and Pickett's The Spirit Level, which explicitly shows that the greatest educational inequalities occur in societies with the greatest gap between the haves and have-nots [32]. Therefore, a performative regime that seeks to redistribute resources in an effort to raise the levels of underperforming learners is in reality aiming at the wrong target. According to Eacott, much of the problem is not with schools or even the teachers but rather lies in the larger society [30]. Schools are but a (re)productive for existing power relations. This means that the outcomes of standardised national exams are largely linked to the difference between people with the required social capital to be part of schooling games and those that do not. Large-scale systematic means, such as the game of schooling, are just an extension of the constitution and legitimising distinctions between groups and individuals.

Besides, England's education system also faces the challenge of having special interest groups that capture local institutions. For instance, the plot behind the Trojan Horse scandal was to introduce conservative Islamic ideals, indoctrinating students in anti-western, fundamentalist ideologies at various schools in the English city of Birmingham. This brought to question the role of school governors and England's amateurish approach to doing a professional job of overseeing schools. Lack

of transparency in the English system calls for a new role for LEAs as the advocate or voice for children and young people within a wider framework of local accountability drawing upon local enterprise partnerships and city regions. Consistent with the call for some local oversight, West and Wolfe suggest that the education secretary should appoint regional school commissioners to oversee academies and free schools in England [33]. As such, other than Hanson's school-based management to empower local educators and parents, as was the case in China, and Nicaragua in 1994, England also revised how the education ministry made system-wide judgments like in Colombia in 1991.

5.   Conclusion

Although a centralised education system is praised for reducing inequalities and standardisation, it often fails to reflect the specific needs of learners because the system is not school-led. A decentralised educational system is preferred in England for many reasons, including better information and targeting, more extraordinary voice and participation, innovation and creative approaches, and improved efficiency and strengthened accountability relationships. Despite this, however, it may encourage social inequalities, in addition to being captive of some elite groups or special interest groups.

England adopts devolution as its approach to educational decentralisation. In addition to this general approach, school-based management is particularly used to empower local educators, students, and parents. However, England's education system is littered with educational inequalities. Additionally, the system can be captive of special interest groups like the influence of extremist ideology in Birmingham schools, which has seen growing calls for a democratic middle tier (LEAs). The reason being that such a tier would replace the current amateurish approach with professionalism in school management.

The findings of this study provide learning lessons to educational leaders about educational decentralisation in England. It helps educational implementers and other stakeholders identify the limitations and strengths of both centralised and decentralised education systems for better educational outcomes. The study's findings may thus aid policymakers in designing the sorts of decentralisation England should pursue. In addition, it offers school governors and education administrators with information on the areas and institutions that require reinforcement, as well as a forum for scholars to identify topics for future investigation. It may initiate future researchers to study the subject more deeply.

This study used desk-based research for data collection. Although changes have been implemented on the ground, the researcher found limited published data for a thorough analysis of the subject under study. Additionally, available information about whether England has a centralised education system or a decentralised one, as some scholars see England's decentralised education system as nothing but a Trojan horse of the state, where the state uses school-level planning to get beyond the school fence and into school leaders' daily practices. These inconsistencies would have been remedied through interviews. For this reason, this study recommends that future researchers conduct interviews with many academics and educational professionals to provide impetus and ideas on this topic.

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