

Devolution of Education: Opinions and Reflections of Executive District Officers (EDOs) in Punjab

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Abstract

With the prologue of devolution of power 2001, district level educational managers are working with new accountability environment. This study was proposed to explore the opinions of Executive District Officer (EDOs) of Punjab regarding the devolution in education. The data was collected through primary source by semi-structured interviews. It was found that most of the district administrations in education like EDOs, had no managerial training before joining these posts. Some of the EDOs described that devolution had little effect on enrolment, dropout, and female enrolment. All EDOs expressed unhappiness over lack of any orientation or professional development provided to them in this context. Most of the powers had been concentrated in the office of EDOs whereas DEOs; Deputy DEOs have merely become reporting officers. The personnel in the hierarchy of education department before devolution were, answerable to people of the same cadre at district, division and provincial level like in district to DEOs, at divisional level to Director (Education) and at provincial level to Director Public Instructions (DPI) but in post- devolution scenario they had to report to the bureaucracy at the district level (District Coordinating Officer) which eroded their autonomy.

Key Words: Devolution of education, Executive District Officers, financing powers, administrative powers.

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Introduction

Government of Pakistan on October 12, 1999, gave a seven-point agenda to the nation including the devolution of power to the grass root level (NRB, 2002). The objectives of changing the system of governance as mentioned by National Reconstruction Bureau (2001 a) were “to restructure the bureaucratic setup and decentralize the administrative and financial authority to the district level and below and refocus administrative systems to allow public participation in decision-making with improved monitoring system at local councils level (p.3)”.

The Devolution Plan (2000) devolved powers and responsibilities, including those related to social services, from the provincial levels to elected district level authorities and local councils. Under devolution, political power, decision-making authority, and administrative responsibilities were moved as close as possible to the village, union council, tehsil and district levels, whereas the major policy-making, coordination, and special service functions left with the provincial governments (p.2).

The provincial governments promulgated the Local Government Ordinance, 2001 in their respective provinces to install a new integrated Local Government System with effect from 14 August 2001 to function within the provincial framework and adhere to the federal and provincial laws.

Decentralization is the allocation of power and authority of decision making from federal to local level to increase the efficiency effectiveness and accountability of management at grassroots level. Decentralization also encourages greater participation of community, modernized the educational institutions and give financial support of school. . It also reinforces local control through deregulation and genuine participation and enhancing collaboration between national, provincial, and regional levels. Overall, improvement in the institutional governance is the major crux of the policy of decentralization (Niadoo, 2002; Rondinelli, 1981; Shah, 2003).

Paqueo and Lammert, (2000) have described three rationales for decentralization in education. Administratively it seems to be the most efficient means of achieving particular educational goals; politically it gives maturation to the one at the bottom and extends their political power; and, ideologically it favours the beliefs that greater local autonomy is inseparable from aims related to particular views of the nature of individuals, society, and knowledge.

Decentralization in education considerably improves administrative efficiency and financial management. Decentralized education system promises to provide the more efficient services, and better reflect local priorities, encourage participation, and, improve quality. In particular, improves the quality and

accessibility of service. Decentralization moves decision making power to community and parents and they have their greater say in schooling decisions and ability to hold service provider accountable. As Fiske (1996) pointed out, that decentralization will improve the quality of teaching and learning by locating decisions closer to the point at which they must be carried out, which will energize teachers and administrators to do a better job and assist teachers to design education programs to meet local needs and to support improvement in learning.

A common argument for the educational decentralization is that local decision makers (school personnel or educational officials) are likely to be more accountable to clients (parents), more responsive to local needs, low cost through cooperation and provide better quality education than the central authorities (Hanson, 2000; and Gershberg, 2005). According to Winkler (2004) that decentralization increased the accountability to receivers and it improves the efficiency of school and thus in turn enhances the quality of education.

Devolution of authority to local government occurs when a government of central authority hands over the authority to local government to make certain kinds of decisions regarding expenses, staffing and education content (e.g., curriculum testing) which is being done by the formal agreement in a manner which suggest a measure of irreversibility such as may occur with the change in constitution (Behrman, Deolalikar and Soon, 2002; Caldwell, 1994).

It is assumed that education controlled by local governments have better knowledge of the idiosyncratic preferences of the area regarding students, teachers and schools and the decision made as close as possible to the site of their implementation as the best and the most relevant information is brought to bear on them. They are in a better position to allocate funds and watch the production of out comes more closely. Moreover they care for equity (Burki, Perry, and Dillinger, 1999; Kemmerer, 1994). In a study carried out by Corcoran, Fuhrman and Belcher (2001) the important role of districts played in providing vision, focus, support and coordination in instructional improvement at school level was analyzed. The findings showed that the central office staff members were struggling to define their role and were in a fix to mention who should determine what was best. Either the schools should do it or the central office should let them know with its sole purpose of informing them. The researcher came out with the result “the decentralization of decision making appeared to be undermining the use of knowledge rather than promoting it” That is why the leaders in the district wanted the staff members to adopt an evidence based approach.

Before devolution the elementary and secondary education in Punjab were headed by respective DPI (Director Public Instruction) who were selected on the basis of seniority from among the education professionals. They were responsible to the Secretary of Education for all elementary and secondary education activity in Punjab. They were assisted by Additional Director of Public Instruction, three Directors and seven Assistant Directors each (Kazmi, 2005).

The major responsibilities of DPI (EE and SS) were to identify educational needs of the community keeping in view the elementary, secondary and higher secondary schools of locality and growth of population, sharing ideas in the development of national education policies and ensure in implementation and ensuring effective implementation of administrative, financial and disciplined rules in the field. If on one hand they would work for staff development and training of the employee, on the other hand, they were responsible for formulating ADB schemes respective schools. Moreover, they supervised the working of divisional directorates, DEOs (SE and EE), and all institutions under the administrative control. Furthermore, budgeting and financing of schools, service and promotion matters, interdivisional transfers of teaching and non-teaching staff were also their major responsibility.

The major responsibilities of directors in divisions (SE and EE) were to implement and carry out the policies of the government, preparing ADP schemes for development of elementary and secondary institutions within the divisions. They would carry out inspection of respective elementary and secondary schools in the divisions and would assist in improving quality and quantity of education in divisions. They hold the financial power of category I officers and authority of re-appropriation of budget at divisional level. Administratively, Directors (EE) had the authority of posting and transfer of Assistant Education Officers (AEOs), headmasters of respective elementary school within the division whereas, Director (SE) posting transfer of SSTs superintendents, headmasters, principals (BS-16 to BS-19).

Prior to decentralization each district had one male and one female DEO to run the official duties in the district. They used to supervise the management of schools upto middle level, construction, opening and staffing of new school, upgrading, maintaining and overseeing development plans of schools. He used to ensure that teachers have been following the approved curriculum or not. DEOs used to be an officer with Category II financial powers. He has administrative as well as financial powers and had been working primarily as implementing authority in the district. He was assisted by DDEO (Male) and DDEO (Female) for each tehsil in the district (Winkler and Hatfield, 2002).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

- Find out the level of understanding of the new roles by Executive District Officers.
- Explore the difficulties in the implementation of decentralization at district level from EDOs perspective.

Nature of the Study

The research design was exploratory and utilized a qualitative interpretative research approach employing semi-structured interviews

Instrumentation

Interview protocol for Education District Officers to assess their understanding level of decentralization was developed and used.

Interview recording

The researcher visited the sampled EDOs individually and recorded the interviews. Formal letters to the interviewees were sent by the researcher at least a couple of weeks before the conduct of the interviews. The interviewees were asked to fix date and time as per convenience of the interviewers and confirmed from them one or two days before the already fixed schedule.

Sampling design

35 Executive District Officers (EDO) were taken as populations for collection of data and generalization of results.

To get the true representative sample out of accessible population, 35 districts of the Punjab province were placed under three following categories according to the literacy rate therein:

Category A: High literacy rate districts

Category B: Medium literacy rate districts

Category C: Low literacy rate districts

Table 1: Categories of Districts Based on Literacy Rate

| Sr. No | Category of district | Rank order by literacy rate | Literacy rate range | Name of districts | Total No. of districts |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|------------------------|
| 1. | A | 1-13 | 70.5% to 47.4 | ● Rawalpindi ● Lahore ● Jehlum ● Gujrat ● Saikot ● Chakwal ● Gujranwala ● Narowal ● Faisalabad, ● T.T Sing ● Attock ● M.B. Din | 12 |
| 2. | B | 14-22 | 47.3 to 36.8 | ● Sargoda Sahiwal ● Sheikhpura ● Multan ● Mianwali ● Hafizabad ● Khushab, ● Khanewal ● Layyah ● Okara ● Jhang ● Vehari | 12 |
| 3. | C | 23-34 | 36.2 to 20.7 | ● Kasur ● Bahawalnagar ● Bahawalpur ● Pakpatan ● Bhakkar ● R.YKhan ● D.G.Khan ● Lodhran ● Muzaffargarh ● Rajanpur ● Nankana | 11 |

Source: PRSP 2007(Age 10 years and above).

Sample for interview with EDOs

After categorization of the districts with respect to literacy rate, the researcher randomly selected two districts from each of three categories in order to conduct interviews with the EDOs.

Table 2: Selected Districts from each Category for Interview

| Sr. No | Category | Total districts | No. of selected districts | Sampled districts |
|--------|----------|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | A | 12 | 02 | ● Rawalpindi ● Faisalabad |
| 2 | B | 12 | 02 | ● Khushab ● Sheikhpura |
| 3 | C | 11 | 02 | ● Nankansahib ● DG Khan |
| Total | | 35 | 06 | |

Development of interview protocol for EDOs

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for EDOs of the province of the Punjab to find out their level of understanding about the policy of decentralization in education, the problems they had been facing and the strategies they adopted to tackle those problems. The questions were developed on the roles and responsibilities of these offices as given in the decentralization document.

The interview questions were formulated in the light of the stated roles and duties of EDOs. There were 19 key questions for EDOs. There were some additional questions in the interview protocol as well. These questions were asked to the interviewees to solicit their opinion about different kinds of problems faced by them and suggestions and measures to address these problems (Appendix A).

Findings

EDOs of the random selected districts were interviewed to solicit their perspective of decentralization. They were contacted for the purpose, a couple of week in advance, to seek their consent and appointment for the time. The researcher mailed an interview protocol along with a brief description of the research so that they may acquaint themselves with the research and prepare answers. Proceeding section presents the analysis of EDOs' interviews by the researcher.

All EDOs had an academic and a professional degree in Education. One of the EDOs who had PhD in Education and who had also worked on administrative posts like deputy secretary, deputy director or DEOs before devolution had better understanding of the merits and demerits of the devolution in education than the others.

Understanding of the concept of decentralization

All officers had more or less the same view point which was very much close to the literary or academic definition of the word decentralization. They were of the view that "Decentralization means to give authority to grass roots level and resolve problems at local level". One of the EDOs defined decentralization in education in these words, "if all powers related to schools are centered at provincial or divisional level, it is centralization but if they are devolved to districts, it is decentralization." He further stated, "Decentralization benefits schools a lot because most of their issues, problems and inquiries get resolved in their own districts." They all felt that decentralization was introduced by the federal government by giving powers from

provincial governments to districts. The purpose was to solve the problems of district at district level but at the same time one of the officer was of the view that the devolved system was an administrative burden on district economy and it had done little except for the information which they used to send to secretary through directors is now routed through District Nazims and DCOs

Educational problems of the districts

The EDOs of the districts with high literacy rate considered that lack of motivation and commitment on the part of teachers and HTs had been the biggest reason of problems like dropout and teachers' absenteeism. But others stated that lack of teachers and HTs had been the biggest problem. "A school without head teacher is a like a nation without leader and expecting solutions of the problems like teachers' absentees, dropout, lack of enrolment and school management, with a leaderless school, is not possible" said one of the EDO.

Devolution, a tool for the solution of educational problems

Majority of EDOs considered that equity within the school in the district, increasing enrolment, controlling dropout, increasing teacher student ratio, teacher absentees and monitoring of the school could be improved through this system largely.

Table 3: Effectiveness of the Decentralized System in Resolving with Educational Issues

| Issues | Level of influence in frequencies | | | | | N = 6 | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|-----|
| | I don't know | Not at all | A little | To some extent | To a large extent | \bar{X} | SD |
| | | | | | | Max. value= 5 | |
| Equity within the district school | | | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4.33 | .51 |
| Increasing enrolment of students | | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4.17 | .75 |
| Controlling dropout | | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4.17 | .75 |
| Improving teacher student ratio | | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4.17 | .75 |
| Teacher absenteeism | | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4.00 | .89 |
| Monitoring of the schools | | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4.00 | .89 |
| Improvements of school plants | | | 4 | 1 | 1 | 3.50 | .54 |
| Teachers accountability | | | 4 | 1 | 1 | 3.50 | .54 |
| HTs accountability | | | 4 | 2 | | 3.33 | .51 |
| Efficiency of school council | | | 4 | 2 | | 3.33 | .51 |

Majority of the EDOs believed that decentralization in education had only been done from provinces to districts but not to schools. To them the best solution to these educational problems was through school-based management, which had a high potential of solving these problems than merely devolving power to districts from the provinces. Moreover, they stated that EDOs were overburdened to rarely have time to concentrate on these issues. School based management had more potential to solve such problems. Hiring of teachers at district level was another problem requiring a long time as well. Members of school councils were not that much trained. They need training to do the work properly. So far as teachers and HTs' accountability was concerned, district monitoring teams just visited and went back. But to bring a culture of responsibility this sort of visits had little impact. School based management could solve such issues in an appropriate manner.

Training and development of EDOs

One of the important elements of the implementation process is the capacity building which needs proper training of all the stakeholders. All EDOs were of the opinion that they needed training in order to carry-out their duties and responsibilities smoothly. They distrustfully stated that no training was given to them either before or after decentralization that marked a big question on planning system.

The most critical incident, which the Researcher observed, was the complete absence of training or orientation before joining the duty. As, this post had been specifically carved out in the district after the devolution plan, it was important to give some initial training or orientation to these people. Not only that training was not given before joining, they were not even provided opportunities for professional development after holding this post for more than three years. Without proper training it was really difficult for EDOs to carry out their official duties.

This is also to be noted that these officials were selected from among senior HTs and teachers but running a highly centralized sort of district office was entirely different than running a school. This caused a frustration among these officers. Most of them claimed that after holding the position for months they had been unable to adjust as they did not know how to do varied things. When they finally managed to understand they were transferred to other districts.

Problems with devolution in Punjab

One of the EDO stated that "The biggest problem in my personal opinion is that the administrative and financial powers were given to districts but they had no capacity to run the system. They do not have technical skill to run it properly."

Another EDO described, "There is either ambiguity between the powers of Nazim and DCO or they are unaware of it i.e. some times Nazim transfers a man without any consultation with the DCO who is the administrative head of the district. There is also a gap between appointing and transfer authority of EDO. EDOs are appointing authority up to Grade 16 but not the transferring authority to that level."

All EDOs emphatically claimed that though the administrative, financial powers have been devolved to districts but this sort of decentralization was just recentralization as a big bulk of powers had been concentrated with EDOs who were overburdened to the extent that they could not pay attention to any one task simultaneously. Moreover, the DEOs, DDEOs who, in the previous administration, had authority over many issues being part of the line management had now become just staff management of the EDOs office. That is why all EDOs expressed that the functions of these offices under devolution are only reporting. They all felt that concentrating all powers in EDOs had just decreased the expected benefits of the decentralization.

One of the EDO who had been a part of previous educational administration at provincial, division and district level pointed out that most of the administrative and financial powers in the pre-devolution era had been delegated to district level. Administration at all three levels, except in the provincial education department, had been either from school or college cadre but not from bureaucracy. He further explained that in this so called devolution all powers had been concentrated in the office of DCO, a bureaucrat, and District Nazim. He was of the opinion that the devolution plan was not implemented fully.

Only some provincial powers were devolved and no federal powers in education like curriculum development and salary were devolved. The true spirit of devolution in education had been possible if most of the powers had been devolved to schools for making school based management stronger. The true devolution lies in making HTs of the schools stronger and let them exercise their powers.

Accountability

One of the main objectives of decentralization described in literature is the increased monitoring and accountability of teachers and HTs. Most of the EDOs agreed that monitoring improved through devolution. Schools were now monitored by district monitoring committees, school councils and District Education Officers. That is why; it reduced teachers' and HTs' absenteeism and improved financial accountability of the schools.

But, at the same time, one of the EDO had the reservation on devolving monitoring to district level. He felt that owing to the social set up of our society and prevailing culture, favoritism and nepotism could cause a serious threat to the monitoring and accountability process. Authorities in district may have their own vested interest living in the same community with the people to whom they were monitoring which could blot the process of monitoring .That was why he proposed a fool proof monitoring system based at provincial level so that biases may be avoided.

Grants from federal and provincial Level

Only one EDO mentioned about the grant of federal government through ESR program. He pointed out that through Science Lab Rehabilitation Program, science labs were constructed in 24 secondary schools of the district. Actually most of the EDOs, due to lack of training on financial matters regarding grants, were unable to discriminate between federal or provincial grants and district own resources for education.

EDOs' capacity building training plan

Researcher prepared a list of the training programmes and asked EDOs to identify the level of need of the training to be imparted to them which could develop their working as EDOs

Table 4: Level of Training Needed by EDOs

| Areas | Level of need in frequencies | | | | \bar{X} Max. value= 4 | SD |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|-------------------------------|------|
| | I am not sure | No need | Some need | Great need | | |
| Preparing budget | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3.33 | .81 |
| Issues regarding DDO | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3.33 | .81 |
| Purchase rules and regulations | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3.33 | .81 |
| Office management | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3.17 | .75 |
| Communication skills | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3.17 | .75 |
| Job related rules and regulations | | | 2 | 2 | 3.00 | .89 |
| Education supervision | | | 2 | 2 | 3.00 | .89 |
| School council issues | | | 2 | 3 | 2.83 | .75 |
| Student welfare | 2 | 1 | 3 | | 2.17 | .98 |
| Curricular activities | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2.17 | 1.16 |
| Personality development | 2 | 1 | 3 | | 2.17 | .98 |

The above table shows that EDOs considered issues like preparation of budget, issues related to DDO, rules and regulations related to purchase and job, office management, educational supervision and communication skills were the areas where they needed training and development to a great extent in order to carry on their work well. They all suggested a two to three weeks training to be imparted after every six months. Moreover, they were of the view that an orientation workshop should be compulsory for the EDOs before joining the office. In this way they will be in a position to deal with various matters effectively.

EDOs financial powers

All EDOs expressed that financial powers had increased but when the Researcher compared it with the power of Director of Division in the previous administration, it had actually decreased as Director was a Category I officer having more financial powers than EDO. According to Punjab Local Governments (Accounts) Rules 2001 (chapter 4) the powers of various district government offices are given and EDO has been placed as a category II officer whereas DCO is given category I financial powers. In pre-devolution era DEO used to enjoy the status of category II officer according to Delegation of Financial Powers Rules, 1990 (First Schedule) which were promulgated on 27th of March 1990. The Researcher observed that though their financial power decreased but the real amount, they could spend, actually increased in the Punjab Delegation of Financial Power 2006 which were effective from 2006 (which may let them think that they were category I officers).

Administrative powers of EDO

They all perceived that their administrative powers had been curtailed as compared to Director Division in the previous administrative structure. They even did not have powers to transfer secondary school teachers where as in previous administrative set up the Directors were empowered in this regards.

Discussion

Aria (1995) stated that individual as well as community empowerment is necessary for the accomplishment of task. If empowerment is not associated to devolution, it would lead to failure. Similar case happened here in Pakistan when DEO, DDEO and AEO at district level were not empowered and they became staff management of the EDO office. It would have been better if these officers had been empowered as well as to the HTs of the schools. Community participation in school council was good but parents and community members need to be trained to carry on

what had been expected of them. EDO office did less in moving forward in this regard. For this purpose, they always look at the provincial government, which is against the will of devolution. They must try to work to chalk out plans with the help of HTs. During monthly meeting of HTs with EDO, they must try to develop it using the resources of the schools.

In the prevailing system there need to be a month long orientation workshop before they join as EDOs. Moreover, their professional development in issues regarding their new assigned duties is essential. The Researcher extracted through their interviews that they lack in vision. They needed professional development in rules regarding jobs, purchasing, educational supervision and communication skills. In cases where they have been declared DDOs, their powers are those of category II, a status that limits their powers of budget execution. Financial powers of the EDOs needs to be increased from category II officer to category I officer.

Moreover, it would be suggested that DEO might be given financial powers of category II officers. Similarly, HTs of high schools with large number of students may be given financial powers of category II officers. This will relieve a big burden from DCO, EDOs and DEOs. Similarly, DDO powers of Category III for high schools and middle schools HTs. Likewise, most of the administrative powers might be devolved to DEOs, DDEOs and AEOs which would help in decreasing work load pressure on EDO Education. Much of the administrative powers were concentrated in the office of the EDO that needs to be devolved up to lower levels.

Recommendations

- Training sessions should be conducted for EDOs to avoid stress.
- Most of the academic, administrative and financial powers in education were devolved from provincial to district governments. It would be better if these powers are devolved by shifting some decision-making and budgetary functions from district to schools rather 'steering' the whole system from the DCOs' and EDOs' (Education) offices of the districts.
- Decentralization and devolution of authority within the administrative hierarchies in the district should be considered.
- The policies and programs should be implemented in collaboration with all stake holders and a proper monitoring and evaluation system should be designed to provide feedback into the decision making process.
- Financial powers of EDOs Education should be increased from Category II to Category I officer. Similarly DEOs and secondary school HTs should be given

financial powers of Category II officers. Improving financial power of EDO will minimize dependency on DCO. Similarly giving financial powers to DEOs and secondary school head teachers will help in decreasing dependency on district management.

- Similarly DEO and DDEOs should be empowered administratively to become line authority in the district rather than staff authority of the EDOs office.
- Pre-posting orientation workshops are very essential for all administrative jobs in the district especially EDOs, DEOs, DDEOs and AEOs for proper understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities. Similarly head teachers need to be professionally developed through trainings to understand the spirit of devolution. Need based training should be scheduled for all administration in the district.

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