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Does Decentralization Impact Education Quality?

Education systems around the developing world are being decentralized. Decision making powers and responsibilities are being transferred from central government education ministries to local governments and schools. While schools are being decentralized for a number of reasons, the question uppermost on the minds of educators is how decentralization affects the quality of schooling.

Decentralization can potentially improve the quality of education. In particular, the great promise of decentralization is improved accountability by schools to the beneficiaries of education. Decentralization not only reduces the distance between the decision maker and the beneficiary, it also may result in new governance arrangements such as school management committees that increase parental participation and oversight. School report cards and campaigns to inform parents of the resources their children should receive in school further strengthen accountability in decentralized schools.

The research literature on effective schools in developing countries suggests other ways in which decentralization may improve quality. Among the characteristics of effective schools identified by education researchers are strong educational leadership, consensus and cohesion among teachers, and parental involvement. When decision making is decentralized to the school level (i.e., school autonomy), each of these characteristics is usually strengthened. Many countries with autonomous schools require that parents and teachers work together to create school improvement plans, which are then funded by government and managed by school management committees.

Several studies have been undertaken to evaluate whether or not decentralization's promise to raise quality is a reality. In general, these studies find results consistent with expectations. In particular, decentralization strengthens parental participation, and parental participation is one of the most important variables affecting student achievement. In addition, studies have found that school improvement plans, school level teacher recruitment, and school-based selection of textbooks all contribute to quality.

While evaluation research demonstrates that decentralization may positively affect school quality, it also shows that this is not always the case and that some educational functions are better left centralized. For example, a study in Argentina found that quality improved in well-managed local governments and deteriorated in poorly-managed local governments. And an international study found that student achievement is higher in countries where central governments retain control over the curriculum and national examinations.

While research shows that decentralization can improve education, the magnitude of the improvement is small in most cases, and the improvements are almost always found in cases where responsibilities have been decentralized to schools instead of to sub-national governments. Clearly, decentralization may improve education, but more work needs to be done to better understand how decentralization should be designed and implemented to fully realize its potential.

