
Decentralisation in Education Systems

Seminar Report



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

DECENTRALISATION IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Seminar Report

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is an independent and self-governing organisation. The Agency is co-funded by the ministries of education in its member countries and by the European Commission, and supported by the European Parliament.



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The views expressed by any individual in this document do not necessarily represent the official views of the Agency, its member countries or the Commission.

Editors: Verity Donnelly, Edda Óskarsdóttir and Amanda Watkins, Agency Staff

Extracts from the document are permitted provided that a clear reference to the source is given. This report should be referenced as follows: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017. *Decentralisation in Education Systems – Seminar Report*. (V.J. Donnelly, E. Óskarsdóttir and A. Watkins, eds.). Odense, Denmark

With a view to greater accessibility, this report is available in accessible electronic format on the Agency's website: www.european-agency.org

ISBN: 978-87-7110-629-9 (Electronic)

© European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2017

Secretariat
Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office
Rue Montoyer, 21
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org

www.european-agency.org



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is an outcome of the Thematic Seminar on Decentralisation in Education Systems, held in Reykjavík in October 2016. The seminar was jointly organised by Iceland's Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. The contributions of the following people to the seminar and to this report are gratefully acknowledged:

- George Borg, Director General, Directorate for Educational Services, Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta
- Brendan Doody, Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Skills, Ireland
- Berit Holmlimo, Directorate for Education and Training, Norway
- Anna Magnea Hreinsdóttir, Director, Department for School and Family, Borgarbyggð Municipality, Iceland
- Professor Jón Torfi Jónasson, Faculty of Teacher Education, School of Education, University of Iceland
- Francesca Moser, Deputy Director, National Special Education Centre, Switzerland
- Alen Kofol, Inspector, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Republic of Slovenia
- Mudīte Reigase, Head of the Division for Special Education in the National Centre for Education, Latvia
- María José Ruiz Peñalver, National Centre for Education, Innovation and Research, Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, Spain



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
PREAMBLE	5
INTRODUCTION TO ISSUES AROUND DECENTRALISATION	7
What is decentralisation?.....	7
Strengths of decentralised systems.....	8
Challenges for decentralised systems	9
EXAMPLES OF APPROACHES IN COUNTRIES.....	11
Governance	11
Regional disparity	12
Quality assurance	13
Data collection.....	15
BUILDING CAPACITY ACROSS AND BETWEEN LEVELS WITHIN EDUCATION SYSTEMS.....	17
THE NEED TO EXAMINE ‘DIMENSIONS OF DECENTRALISATION’	20
CONCLUDING COMMENTS	23
REFERENCES.....	24



PREAMBLE

The extent to which national education systems are decentralised has a clear impact on policy and practice for inclusive education. Decentralisation can be considered a key variable in context analysis and change management at all education system levels. Despite this, it may not currently receive sufficient attention. Within the Agency's work, as well as wider educational research and policy analysis activities, there is a need for greater clarity around how decentralisation impacts upon countries' policy and practice for inclusive education. Given the different approaches taken in the Agency's member countries, a clearer understanding of this is crucial for wider Agency work.

In order to explore some of the main issues, this report aims to identify some emerging trends in relation to decentralisation in education systems generally, and systems for inclusive education specifically. It explores the main strengths and challenges of countries' different approaches through discussion around four key topics that arise within decentralisation debates in all countries:

1. Governance
2. Regional disparity
3. Quality assurance
4. Data collection.

These topics were presented and discussed in a [Thematic Seminar on Decentralisation in Education Systems](#), held in Reykjavík in October 2016. The seminar was jointly organised by Iceland's Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Agency. The seminar participants were representatives from 29 European countries, along with key decision-makers from national level and local municipalities in Iceland.

The seminar included workshops linked to the four key topics above and keynote inputs where challenges and opportunities linked to decentralisation debates were presented.

The keynote input from Verity Donnelly (2016) explored issues of decentralisation from an international perspective. She highlighted the growing evidence across countries of increasing segregation and disadvantage experienced by some learners, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. She argued that addressing such equity issues involves going beyond the redistribution of resources across the system. It requires a commitment to re-organising the educational system across all government levels in order to focus on fair access to the mainstream system for all learners.



In his keynote input, Jón Torfi Jónasson (2016) identified the main dilemmas related to the centralised-decentralised debate. These include how top-down initiatives, government responsibilities, learning communities and teacher ownership of change are understood and then implemented by stakeholders. He suggested that, within centralisation-decentralisation debates, issues of policy aspiration and ambition, formal responsibility, and the potential institutionalisation of mistrust are at stake and must be clearly understood.

This report builds on the various discussions held within the Thematic Seminar. It begins by introducing the topic of decentralisation and the related challenges and opportunities. It then presents examples of approaches that countries are taking in relation to the four key topics that were debated in the seminar. The final sections examine how countries can potentially develop their capacities for further policy improvement and education reform through reflection on levels of decision-making and accountability.



INTRODUCTION TO ISSUES AROUND DECENTRALISATION

Decentralisation in education systems is a topic that is highly relevant in the current policy environment. This is particularly true in the context of reforms likely to be needed as countries move towards a more inclusive system. A central issue in the reform effort for every nation is getting the right balance between centralisation and decentralisation (Caldwell, 2009). The main source of tension and subject of debate lies in formulating and implementing policy that decides where authority, responsibility and accountability should reside.

The idea of transferring responsibility and decision-making to local bodies appears to sit well with more democratic and participatory approaches. These are an integral part of inclusive policy and practice. However, complex decentralised systems may make it more difficult to ensure transparent funding and equitable opportunities for all learners. The 'necessity to understand who controls and who ought to control education' (Zajda, 2012) is the imperative behind exploring decentralisation. It is also important to examine exactly which functions should be decentralised. These could be, for example, administration, personnel, financing, and curriculum and assessment.

What is decentralisation?

Decentralisation is a term used when responsibility/power is passed to local communities and schools. They can then make their own decisions about many aspects of policy and practice. In centralised systems, a central body may control finance, personnel and resources and also manage policy, curriculum and assessment (Androniceanu and Ristea, 2014). Many researchers (Androniceanu and Ristea, 2014; Busemeyer, 2012; Urbanovič and Patapas, 2012) suggest that, in decentralised systems, resources can be used more efficiently. This in turn can lead to improved learner performance, higher parental satisfaction and stronger accountability with community involvement and support.

Systematic evaluations of decentralised systems are lacking. Nevertheless, effective and efficient government seems to require an appropriate balance of centralisation and decentralisation (both top-down and bottom-up approaches). Even when national governments decentralise functions:

... they retain significant responsibility for developing appropriate and effective national decentralization policies and strengthening local institutional capacity to assume new responsibility (Bernbaum, 2011, p. 8).

The models of decentralisation most often discussed in the research (for example, Radó, 2010; Bernbaum, 2011) are delegation, deconcentration, devolution and decoupling.



Delegation is a transmission of tasks and administrative functions related to specific functions, usually defined by central authorities. This process does not result in a shift in power, as the local agents only have to implement decisions made centrally. An example is when a ministry of education delegates authority to a national examination board which prepares, administers and marks national exams.

Deconcentration may appear to be a move towards a more democratic model, as some authority and responsibility are passed to 'lower' system levels. However, this model usually retains highly centralised operations. The local units may act as agents of central government and be responsible for implementing rules – but not for making decisions or policies. For example, a central office may create district offices to carry out central functions on its behalf, but overall control remains with the central government.

Devolution transfers authority and real responsibility from central to local bodies. According to UNESCO (2014), the devolution of authority in key decision-making areas – such as finance and staffing – has the potential to empower local school communities and improve learner outcomes. Weiler (1993) offers an alternative. He refers to the 'redistributive model' dealing with top-down distribution of power, the 'effectiveness model' focusing on financial aspects and cost-effectiveness of decentralisation, and the 'learning culture' model that addresses cultural diversity and curricula adaptability to local needs.

Decoupling addresses the decoupling between policy directives, implementation and outcomes. It is important for explaining divergent patterns of organisational development in schools. Decoupling serves to protect local schools from too much external scrutiny. This results in more autonomy at the local level and little evidence of ineffectiveness. Furthermore, decoupling occurs with the tacit agreement of all players, from the community to school personnel (Meyer and Rowan, 2008).

These different models of decentralisation are not yet generally in use when considering countries' systems. However, they have the potential to be applied in order to provide greater clarity to future work.

Strengths of decentralised systems

Supporters of decentralised systems argue that they can improve quality and satisfy local demand due to better information about local needs. Such systems can also give more democratic control, participation and choice for families. Other researchers point out that increased competition among localities can lead to greater efficiency (Urbanovič and Patapas, 2012; Busemeyer, 2012). Moreover, in terms of reform, creating smaller, more flexible units may help to overcome the inertia and bureaucracy of larger systems.



There is only limited evidence that decentralisation alone increases education quality. However, the more the process focuses on quality issues and the closer decentralisation actions are to the school/community, the more likely it is that decentralisation, combined with other needed inputs, will contribute to raising education quality (Bernbaum, 2011). Recent Agency work on financing mechanisms for inclusive education (European Agency, 2016a) also suggests that more decentralised systems appear to create a greater opportunity for developing innovative forms of inclusive education. These systems have more flexible learning and support and strengthened school governance (Stubbs, 2008; NESSE, 2012).

Transferring responsibility and authority for education services to local or provincial governments may result in increased accountability and efficiency. This is because it shortens the distance between parent and policy-maker or policy-maker and school. It may also strengthen parental demand for greater quality and/or improve managers' capacity to implement programmes (Weidman and DePietro-Jurand, 2011).

Radó (2010) points out that centralised governance and management systems in education may fail to involve key stakeholder groups in decision-making (i.e. weak democratic political legitimacy). This reduces the stakeholders' capacity to implement decisions (i.e. low professional legitimacy). He notes that these deficiencies can add up to a 'legitimacy crisis' in centralised systems.

Challenges for decentralised systems

Decentralised systems can face effectiveness, equity and accountability issues when badly co-ordinated provision leads to a fragmented system (European Agency, 2016a). Some of these challenges arise due to central ministries not undertaking monitoring and training functions to give real decision-making and management power to lower levels. They may also arise from difficulties in executing decisions at the local level due to a lack of funding from the decision-makers (Bernbaum, 2011).

Bernbaum (2011) stresses the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of relevant staff when working with ministries of education. It is also necessary to support capacity-building to assist staff to carry out these roles and responsibilities. It is especially important to ensure that:

- there is no duplication in the division of roles between different system levels;
- funding is commensurate with responsibilities;
- there is action to increase the capacity of local areas.

Bernbaum adds that, beyond working within the ministries of education, it is important to interact with key actors from the ministry of finance and other relevant ministries and/or autonomous or semi-autonomous bodies. Overall, strong



monitoring and accountability mechanisms are required to ensure that resource allocation and the implementation of policy goals are consistent. In their recent work on governance, Burns et al. (2016) stress the need to align accountability pressures within and across governance levels, across programmes and stakeholders – all with a focus on dialogue and transparency.

Decentralisation leads to increased school autonomy and competition. This may exacerbate differences between schools and educational outcomes and, in the longer term, social inequalities. Many countries attempt to address this risk of inequality in inputs and service quality by introducing national standards for education services. Countries may also redistribute resources in an attempt to neutralise the effects of uneven local taxes (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2014).

Busemeyer (2012) suggests that decentralisation can lead to more, rather than less, bureaucracy and create administrative overload at local level. Local institutions can be captured by special interests and ‘gaming’ of the system can occur when performance standards are set at the distant national level. In the context of high-quality education for all learners, benefits are seen when the culture both within and among school communities is collaborative – not competitive.

A further challenge is the provision of accurate data. Actors at all levels need clear and relevant information on the academic and financial performance of their schools relative to other schools. This includes expenses, resource use and education outcomes. There is also a need to consider the use of education information with wider stakeholders – for example, service users. This in turn requires action to improve the capacity to use information at the local level, and recognition that this is also likely to increase demand for information.



EXAMPLES OF APPROACHES IN COUNTRIES

The October 2016 Thematic Seminar included four workshops. These were linked to each of the four key topics of governance, regional disparity, quality assurance and data collection. The discussions began with short inputs from representatives from two Agency member countries, each taking a more centralised or decentralised approach to the topic. The intention was to exemplify potential similarities and/or differences in policy and practice considering the degrees of decentralisation in the education system.

In presenting the work in their countries, representatives considered:

- Challenges that the selected issue poses in their country
- Strategies used in their country to overcome these challenges
- Perceived opportunities for future developments.

Agency staff moderated the workshops. Notes on the discussions about emerging issues served as the basis for the sections presented below.

Governance

Burns (2015) notes that effective governance works through building capacity, open dialogue and stakeholder involvement. Governance is a balance between accountability and trust, innovation and risk avoidance, consensus-building and making difficult choices. The central level remains important – even in decentralised systems – to trigger and steer education through strategic vision, clear guidelines and feedback.

Increasingly, national authorities – while appearing to relax their hold – find new ways of regulating education. Hudson (2007) suggests that the focus of control is shifting to education outputs. This includes demands for quality controls, standardised testing, evaluations and the introduction of national bodies. In addition, national authorities may introduce ‘soft’ forms of control. These may be information dissemination, joint analysis and increased use of evaluation and quality control. This trend can affect many aspects of school practice – for example, curricula function and design and the use of qualifications.

An essential issue for clarifying roles and responsibilities across government levels – a central governance task – is how to find better solutions to enable and support teachers and schools to provide high-quality inclusive education.

Ireland is considered a country which, up to very recently, has generally taken a relatively centralised approach to education governance. The central government has developed a resource allocation model for learners identified as having special



educational needs (SEN). The incentive behind changing the existing model was a concern about its lack of equity. Resources were allocated to schools based on the assessment and diagnosis of individual learners' SEN. The risk of over-identifying certain minority groups of learners with SEN and the increased risk of lower expectations based on labelling or diagnosis were also reasons for changing the existing model. Furthermore, there was concern that the allocation system was not linked to schools' needs.

The new policy for SEN resource allocation was developed based on the National Council for Special Education's 2014 policy advice that emphasises a needs-based approach. According to this policy:

- learners are welcome and enabled to enrol in the local school;
- additional teaching support is allocated to schools, not individual learners;
- each school deploys the resources they receive to meet their learners' learning needs.

A newly established Regional Support Service supports schools in dealing with exceptional cases. The new resource allocation model is based on two main factors: each school's educational profile – including the number of learners with complex needs, the learners' gender, and the school's social context – and a component based on enrolment that is designed to support inclusion. The resource allocation will be reviewed every two years.

In contrast, **Switzerland** can be seen as a country with a highly decentralised education system. Administrative tasks and financing for education are divided between the Swiss Confederation and the Cantons. National law codifies the promotion of integration and inclusion. However, individual schools, in consultation with parents, are responsible for placement decisions. Switzerland's challenge, therefore, is that there is one national inclusion policy, but many different ways of following it among the Cantons.

Currently, the Cantons are exploring opportunities for enhancing education system governance. These are based on inter-cantonal agreements for standardised eligibility procedures, using statistics to monitor education, and institutionalised inter-cantonal co-operation in educational matters.

Regional disparity

Regional disparity is a factor that needs to be monitored in both decentralised and centralised systems. In more decentralised systems, it is often assumed that the playing field is not level and that poorer regions face significant constraints. These constraints prevent them from delivering services in the same way as their richer



counterparts, thereby maintaining existing patterns of disparities in the provision of goods and services and in wealth (Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra, 2010).

Iceland (a country taking a very decentralised approach to education) and **Slovenia** (a country with a highly centralised education system) reported on their main challenges regarding regional disparity in educational inputs and quality of educational outcomes. These mainly involve unequal access to funds and resources, such as specialists and qualified teachers.

As a strategy for equal opportunity across areas, Iceland has established the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund. It redistributes resources among municipalities in Iceland. The fund has a role in equalising the municipalities' abilities to raise revenues and meet expenditures. Over 10% of the revenues of local authorities come from the Equalization Fund. These take the form of special allocations, equalisation contributions and contributions such as the transfer of costs of services for learners with recognised SEN.

Slovenia reports divergence among communities in terms of national examinations results, school differences, and a lack of ambition and collaboration among those who are working with individual learners. Slovenia's response to regional disparity is to examine the reasons for the different national examinations results and to emphasise co-operation with parents and other professionals through better communication and co-ordination of practice. It furthermore aims to increase flexibility in the process of obtaining a legal decision for additional educational support to meet individual learning needs and to stress the significance of individual education plans for learners with SEN.

Quality assurance

A crucial element in increasing system effectiveness is the monitoring and evaluation of practice to hold stakeholders to account and ensure both equity and excellence for all learners. Sustaining educational improvements in the longer term requires integration and mediation across each system level, from the classroom to the education minister's office (Barber et al., 2010). The specific functions of the mediation are:

- providing targeted support to schools;
- acting as a buffer between central government and the schools, while interpreting and communicating the improvement objectives in order to manage any resistance to change;
- enhancing collaborative exchange among schools, by facilitating the sharing of best practices, helping them to support each other, share learning and standardise practices (ibid.).



Malta is responding to quality assurance challenges by shifting from a completely centralised system towards a more appropriately balanced centralised and decentralised system. It is moving away from a system where schools were externally reviewed through a thorough – yet questionably sustainable – cycle. This meant schools underwent formal external evaluation once every 10 years. The move is towards empowering schools to perform an effective and valid school self-evaluation. This informs meaningful school development plans to steer school improvement.

A central team from the Quality Assurance Department establishes standards with respective success criteria. Schools are encouraged to use these standards to guide their self-evaluation. The Quality Assurance Department is investing in aligning internal and external review processes. This will mean that that quality assurance is implemented and achieved through a system of on-going self-evaluation, monitoring and review within schools. This self-evaluation is complemented by an external review system and, together, they aim to support overall school improvement. The external review is an instrument for accountability and conformity with national standards and aspirations. It also guides and empowers schools in their on-going quest to improve their practice and their outcomes, while promoting a culture of consistent excellence and rigour in aiming for the highest possible standards.

Norway presents an example of a decentralised system that is dealing with the following challenges:

- How local authorities interpret regulations and national goals
- How they prioritise at local level
- How schools work with the curricula
- How to assure the quality of learners' educational outcomes.

Norway's strategies to address these challenges involve, among others, the use of differently themed inspections conducted through dialogue with schools. The school inspections are based on different concerns, such as investigating how schools follow and implement education plans. Quality assurance is also accomplished through national tests, monitoring national measures and providing guidance and support for curriculum development through online material, an advisory team, national resource centres and a national support system for SEN. An annual questionnaire aimed directly at learners is part of the quality assurance process. It asks learners how they feel about their schools and their learning environment.



Data collection

The provision of accurate data is a challenge in decentralised systems. Clear, comparable, relevant information is essential regarding schools' academic and financial performance on measures such as expenditure, resource use and education outcomes. Regarding the link between socio-economic background and achievement, it is important to know the impact of the policies put in place. This will provide insights into the possible consequences of different types of decentralisation on pupils' educational outcomes and how these might be optimised (West et al., 2010). There is need for wider measures beyond test scores and finance. It is no longer acceptable to claim that education must address learners' development in the broadest sense, and then only assess what can be tested in literacy, mathematics and science and ignore the rest (Alexander, 2012).

Spain faces challenges in providing accurate data within a decentralised system. These challenges manifest in the lack of data from private schools, as it is not included to the same degree as data from public schools. Bureaucracy is increasing in the system and problems in accessing information on statistical data within the administration are perceived. However, a greater challenge is seen in the different ways the Autonomous Communities collect and then analyse the available data.

Strategies to counter these challenges involve a framework for joint statistical work between the Ministry of Education and the Autonomous Communities.

Furthermore, the use of management applications in private schools is being promoted to support data collection. Opportunities are presented by the statistical use of existing administrative registers and by cross-referencing these with other ministries, as well as using existing information networks.

In **Latvia**, public sector governance is centralised. The challenges regarding data collection focus on:

- The potential danger of incorrect data use
- The lack of qualitative data – such as on how support is provided
- The inability to use the quantitative data to compare the development of outcomes
- The long time it takes to collect data about the current situation.

The strategies proposed to counter these challenges are to improve the National Education Information System (NEIS), to avoid the possibility of entering data about learners in several educational institutions and to organise data use for registered users and for public access.



For both Latvia and Spain, a key issue is how data use can reflect all learners. National data collection sets are sometimes missing key questions about some groups of learners. Both countries see data as powerful. However, different stakeholders may have varying expectations of its use and the impact of this on policy and practice. While data on learners is important, it is crucial to have information about support systems' effectiveness to inform improvement and further development.



BUILDING CAPACITY ACROSS AND BETWEEN LEVELS WITHIN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The country examples presented in the previous section highlight three key areas that require consideration when decentralising education policy:

1. Ensuring equity
2. Developing accountability measures and systems
3. Developing local-level capacity across all education system levels and sectors.

According to Peters, government's main tasks are to:

1. *Establish policy goals – determining what government wants to do.*
2. *Create coherence among these goals – ensuring that the numerous goals adopted within government are compatible with one another.*
3. *Implement policies designed to achieve those goals – putting government programmes into effect through the public bureaucracy, perhaps with private sector actors.*
4. *Evaluate the success and failure of programmes and revise them – was the programme implemented properly, did it work, and what lessons can be learned to improve policies in the next round of policymaking? (2012, p. 7).*

In passing responsibility to local level, it is essential to have processes in place to provide the necessary support and capacity-building for stakeholders to effectively manage the increased demands. This is particularly true for any competing demands between horizontal (within system level) and vertical (across system level) accountability mechanisms (Burns et al., 2016).

To ensure consistency in a system that aims to ensure both equity and excellence for all learners, a key role of the central government is, therefore, to create shared ownership of the vision in local communities.

Ainscow et al. (2016) note that local conditions can support schools to develop new and more effective responses to diversity. However, national policy would 'have to be based on and make explicit the values of equity and inclusion' (ibid., p. 35).

In the Thematic Seminar plenary discussions, a line of discussion emerged around building capacity across levels, from central government to local government and communities. The examples from all countries – i.e. those taking more centralised and decentralised approaches – indicate that this capacity-building needs to be considered within different levels, as well as across levels. It must include all stakeholders.

Discussion with community members about values and visions can help to develop a shared ownership of inclusion and achieve a balance of trust and accountability.



Work by the European Agency (2016b, building upon Fullan et al., 2011) highlights enablers of, as well as potential barriers to, local development:

Table 1. Barriers to and enablers of local development

Barriers to local development	Enablers of local development
Conflicting and destructive accountability	Constructive accountability, in line with inclusive values
Individualistic leadership	Collaborative leadership
Fragmented strategy, lacking coherence	Coherent, systemic strategy
Solitary institutions, working in competition	Networked institutions, acting as critical friends
Fear of change; risk avoidance	Mutual support to build confidence and capacity for innovation
Extrinsic motivation, working with a short-term view	Intrinsic motivation, based on a shared commitment to a long-term vision
Narrow (academic, economic) focus on 'measurable' (quantitative) outcomes	Broader focus on participation and achievement in wider areas of study (qualitative)

The level at which policy is created and decisions are made – and the relationships between these levels – is crucial. It requires a balance between responding to local diversity and achieving national goals (Burns et al., 2016). Burns et al. outline five elements that decentralised systems should build on to achieve this balance:

- A focus on process rather than structures
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Stakeholder involvement and capacity-building
- A whole-system approach
- Harnessing evidence and research to inform policy and practice.

The process of capacity-building at local level requires competent school leaders, trusted by the local community (Urbanovič and Patapas, 2012). It also requires internal and external support networks to increase every school's capacity to include all learners. However, care must be taken that work to comply with central



government accountability initiatives does not detract from the focus on self-improvement.

Donnelly (2016) argues that capacity-building to raise the achievements of local communities necessarily involves:

- Leadership that is 'enabling' and aims to develop a collaborative culture based on clear vision
- Support for professional development that increases individual and collective capacity to implement high-quality inclusive education
- Innovation implemented with space to learn from experience and mistakes
- Accountability that values wider achievement, not easy measures driven by market-dependent forces
- Targeted funding
- Explicit and clear national values regarding equity and inclusion.



THE NEED TO EXAMINE ‘DIMENSIONS OF DECENTRALISATION’

The country examples presented in the seminar and summarised in this report clearly show that countries cannot simply be labelled as operating more or less decentralised systems of education. Countries may adopt a more centralised approach to some elements of their education system, while being more decentralised in others. The country examples presented in the seminar show that countries – regardless of the extent of decentralisation – may face similar challenges and opportunities in developing their education systems. It is clear then that decentralisation cannot be understood as a simple, one-dimensional continuum.

Jónasson (2016) suggests that the level of control or freedom within different education system dimensions may be illusory – that, in fact, informal systems and structures may be much more influential than formal structures. Municipalities may have high degrees of freedom in how they run schools and what they emphasise in the curriculum. However, at the same time, they may be under a fairly strict evaluation regime, using standardised exams (even with low stakes) and being tested by (nearly universal) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. In this way, they may actually operate under a centralised regime which is formally considered to be decentralised.

The structural dimensions might be competing and the clearest or simplest dimensions described (and those most often mentioned) may be the least important. Jónasson further notes that different dimensions may operate in ‘opposite directions’ and have very different relative weights in terms of impact. Dimensions that are intended to be the most important may turn out to be less important than others in the reality of system operation. Thus, a system that appears centralised at first sight may indeed be decentralised in reality – and vice versa.

In country reviews of policy and practice, therefore, it is important to focus on the level at which decisions are made for different dimensions. It is also important to consider their impact on different stakeholder groups. Ainscow (2015) points out that policy-makers must recognise that policy details are not amenable to central regulation – those who understand local contexts must deal with the details. These local stakeholders should be trusted to act in learners’ best interests and collaborate for the benefit of all. He highlights the need for experimentation to develop more effective ways of working and a ‘sharp local analysis’ to locate and make better use of existing expertise – with networking to move knowledge around.

Developing such practice may require significant structural and cultural change. This could involve local authorities moving away from a ‘command and control’ perspective, towards one of enabling and facilitating collaborative action (Ainscow



et al., 2016). If change is imposed on schools from any system level, potential benefits in terms of school improvement may be lost (for example, due to reduced opportunities for innovation, collaboration and learning from experience). Greany notes that the self-improving system has:

... unleashed ... innovation within individual schools and localities, yet the loss of national and local infrastructure for collating and sharing 'what works' coupled with the reduced national investment in research and evaluation means that the flow of rigorous evidence between schools and localities remains haphazard (2015, p. 19).

In summary, Jónasson (2016) clearly highlights that, in all education systems, there is 'structural heterogeneity' at all levels and along all dimensions. This creates complexities in painting a clear and simple picture of a decentralised system. He argues that a review of the levels, the actors and the dimensions involved is needed, where the heterogeneity in each case is clearly depicted.

It is paramount that system levels work together coherently to ensure that all learners get a fair deal within an increasingly diverse education system (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015).

In trying to understand the complex issues of decentralisation within country systems, it is important to be clear on and understand the locus of decision-making at different levels, as well as the interaction between these decision-making levels. To develop a clear picture of the actual pattern of decentralisation within a system, further attention should be paid to the operational and governance processes across all system levels for the following dimensions:

- Finance and resources
- Personnel
- Curriculum
- Assessment and qualifications
- Pedagogy
- Teacher/school leader education and professional development
- Quality assurance.

These dimensions are vital for education systems overall, but are considered critical for inclusive education.

Examining the rationale behind decision-making would cast a light on where policy is created and for what specific purpose. It may be that decisions are made



consciously to achieve certain goals. However, it may equally be that policies remain in place when the context has changed and no-one has challenged the status quo.

For each area examined, the accountability measures should also be considered. This will ensure consistency and avoid distortion of practice or ‘unintended consequences’.

Furthermore, in ‘passing down’ responsibility, it is important not only to build capacity, but also to ensure that local authorities/schools fully understand the ‘levels of freedom’. Effective communication is key – as is careful monitoring of policy implementation. Stakeholder involvement is necessary to address any misconceptions around roles, responsibilities and available flexibility and to ensure the system’s maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Exploring a country’s education system along these dimensions and in this manner could lead to a country profile built on the locus of decision-making for each dimension. Such a profile could place country education systems on a continuum, from highly centralised to highly decentralised. This could support more detailed analysis of policy and practice in the various dimensions. Importantly, it could:

- support an analysis of inter-relationships and connections within and between system levels and dimensions;
- support an in-depth study of dimensions that are effectively managed at different levels in different contexts in the move towards more inclusive policy and practice;
- enable decision-making around the actions needed to engage certain stakeholder groups at various levels to support policy improvement and education reform;
- facilitate, through analysis and support, the sharing of practice among countries – not ‘cloning’, but, as Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) say, cross-pollinating ideas.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

All countries are increasingly emphasising policy and implementation plans and are wrestling with appropriate central government support and regulatory measures to constantly develop the education system (UNESCO, 2014). This report highlights the need for greater attention to specific aspects – or dimensions – of country contexts when exploring decentralisation. In particular, it has attempted to highlight the possible impact of different degrees of decentralisation/centralisation linked to different dimensions of the education system.

It argues against viewing country education systems on a one-dimensional continuum from highly centralised to highly decentralised. Instead, it may be more correct and effective to view them as presenting a pattern and profile of decision-making relating to different dimensions occurring at different system levels.

Any model of decentralisation needs to be relevant to both the country and local area contexts, given that ‘even the best policies travel badly’ (Harris, 2012, p. 395). Rather than trying to replicate policy from other countries, international experience should serve to ‘enrich policy analysis, not to short-cut it’ (Raffe, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, attention should focus on clarifying historical reasons for policies and practices. It is vital to pay attention to contextual factors, which have more impact on educational settings than policy borrowed from other countries can hope to achieve (Raffe, 2011).



REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M., 2015. *Towards Self-Improving School Systems: Lessons from a city challenge*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge
- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Hopwood, L. and Thomson, S., 2016. *Primary Schools Responding to Diversity: barriers and possibilities*. CPRT Research Survey 8. York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust
- Alexander, R., 2012. *International Evidence, National Policy and Educational Practice: making better use of international comparisons in education*. Keynote presentation delivered at the New Directions in Teacher Education International Conference, Canterbury Christ Church University, 18 July 2012
- Androniceanu, A. and Ristea, B., 2014. 'Decision Making Process in the Decentralized Educational System' *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 149, 37–42
- Barber, M., Chijioke, C. and Mourshed, M., 2010. *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*. Chicago, IL: McKinsey & Company
- Bernbaum, M., 2011. *Equip2 Lessons Learned in Education. Decentralization*. Washington, DC: USAID, EQUIP 2 and FHI 360
- Burns, T., 2015. *Governing Complex Education Systems. Trust and Education*. Keynote presentation delivered at the OECD Governing Complex Education Systems Conference in The Hague, 7 December 2015.
www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/governing-complex-education-systems-overview-and-work-on-trust-the-hague (Last accessed March 2017)
- Burns, T., Köster, F. and Fuster, M., 2016. *Education Governance in Action: Lessons from Case Studies*. Paris: OECD Publishing
- Bussemeyer, M., 2012. *Two decades of decentralization in education governance: Lessons learned and future outlook for local stakeholders*. Presentation delivered at the OECD Conference 'Effective local governance in education', in Warsaw, 16 April 2012.
www.forschungsnetzwerk.at/downloadpub/50293543_Two_decades_of_decentralization_in_education_governance.pdf (Last accessed March 2017)
- Caldwell, B. J., 2009. 'Centralisation and Decentralisation in Education: A New Dimension to Policy', in J. Zajda and D.T. Gamage (eds.), *Decentralisation, School-Based Management, and Quality*. Dordrecht: Springer
- Donnelly, V.J., 2016. *Decentralisation – an overview of international trends*. Keynote presentation delivered at the European Agency Thematic Seminar on Decentralisation in Education Systems, Reykjavík, Thursday 27 October 2016



- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016a. *Financing of Inclusive Education: Mapping Country Systems for Inclusive Education*. (S. Ebersold, ed.). Odense, Denmark
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016b. *Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education – Literature Review*. (A. Kefallinou, ed.). Odense, Denmark
- Greany, T., 2015. *The Self-Improving System in England: A Review of Evidence and Thinking*. Leicester: Association of School and College Leaders
- Hargreaves, A. and Ainscow, M., 2015. 'The top and bottom of leadership and change' *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2015, 97 (3)
- Hargreaves, A. P. and Shirley, D. L. (eds.), 2009. *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin
- Harris, A., 2012. 'Leading system-wide improvement' *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 15 (3), 395–401
- Herbst, M. and Wojciuk, A., 2014. 'Inequity in a decentralised education system – evidence from Poland' *Edukacja*, 6 (131), 5–22
- Hudson, C., 2007. 'Governing the Governance of Education: The State Strikes Back?' *European Educational Research Journal*, 6 (3), 266–282
- Jónasson, J. T., 2016. *Where do we find decentralization? What does it mean – and to whom?* Keynote presentation delivered at the European Agency Thematic Seminar on Decentralisation in Education Systems, Reykjavík, Thursday 27 October 2016
- Meyer, J.W. and Rowan, B., 2008. 'The Structure of Educational Organizations', in J. H. Ballantine and J. Z. Spade (eds.), *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press
- NESSE Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training, 2012. *Education and Disability/Special Needs. Policies and practices in education, training and employment for students with disabilities and special educational needs in the EU*. Report prepared for the European Commission. Brussels: European Commission
- Peters, B. G., 2012. 'Governance and the Rights of Children: Policy, implementation and monitoring', *Working Paper 2012-11*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research
- Radó, P., 2010. *Governing Decentralized Education Systems. Systemic Change in South Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Open Society Foundations



- Raffe, D., 2011. 'Policy Borrowing or Policy Learning? How (not) to improve education systems' *CES Briefing No. 57*. Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh
- Rodríguez-Pose, A. and Ezcurra, R., 2010. 'Does decentralization matter for regional disparities? A cross-country analysis' *Journal of Economic Geography*, 10 (5), 619–644
- Stubbs, S., 2008. *Inclusive Education. Where there are few resources*. Oslo: The Atlas Alliance
- UNESCO, 2014. *Decentralization as an Education System Reform* (L. Benete and W. Ible, eds.). Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok.
www.unescobkk.org/education/news/article/decentralization-as-an-education-system-reform/ (Last accessed March 2017)
- Urbanovič, J. and Patapas, A., 2012. 'Decentralisation Reforms of Education Management: Theoretical and Practical Issues' *Viešoji Politika ir Administravimas/Public Policy and Administration*, 2012, 11 (4), 659–671
- Weidman, J.C. and DePietro-Jurand, R., 2011. *Equip2 State-of-the-Art Knowledge in Education. Decentralization. A Guide to Project Design Based on a Comprehensive Literature and Project Review*. Washington, DC: USAID, EQUIP 2 and FHI 360
- Weiler, H., 1993. 'Control versus Legitimation: The Politics of Ambivalence' in J. Hannaway and M. Carnoy (eds.), *Decentralization and School Improvement: Can We Fulfil the Promise?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- West, A., Allmendinger, J., Nikolai, R. and Barham, E., 2010. 'Decentralisation and educational achievement in Germany and the UK' *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 28 (3), 450–468
- Zajda, J., 2012. *Centralisation and decentralisation in education: implications for standards and quality*. Invitational keynote address delivered at the International Conference on Educational Paradigm and Local Educational Development, 6–7 July 2012, Faculty of Education, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei

Secretariat:

Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000
Odense C
Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office:

Rue Montoyer 21
BE-1000
Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org

