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Does School-Based Management Help to Improve Quality of Education? A Case of Student Achievement in Nepal

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Abstract

Several years after the adoption of decentralization policy in Nepal, quality of education is still a concern. The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of school-based management for quality education in general, and the effect of transferring school management to local communities for the improvement of student achievement in particular. This paper employs document analysis as a method to explore school management issues, and discusses various opportunities and upsetting factors with regards to the transfer of school management to local communities. Nepal's historical perspectives on school management, the government's policy shift to transfer school management to local communities and student achievement results from the Government of Nepal's National Assessment of Student Achievement (NASA) reports have been discussed. The findings reveal that student achievement has been stagnant, if not declining, in spite of considerable achievement in access to education after *partial* decentralization of school management. The paper concludes that the process of policy reform should be driven by demands which can be ensured through participatory management of schools, a process that includes consultative decision making, accommodation of interests of diverse stakeholders and strong commitment of both school leaders and bureaucrats.

Keywords: school management, decentralization, quality education, student achievement.



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Introduction

The rehearsal for decentralization in Nepal started in 1963 with the forming of a power decentralization commission, and subsequently, a decentralization committee was formed in 1969, followed by enforcement of a decentralization act in 1982. Later, the political movement in 1990 overthrew the 30-year long non-party *Panchayat* regime and restored multi-party democracy, paving the way for the actual decentralization process in Nepal. However, within the education sector, the decentralization process was *re-enforced* only in 2001, after an amendment to the Education Act which pronounced the policy of transferring school management responsibilities to local communities (World Bank, 2009). Article 11.17 of the 2001 Education Act provisioned a clause that stated “school management responsibility can be taken” with the explanation that local government or School Management Committees (SMCs) can take management accountability of public schools after signing a contract with their District Education Office (Khanal, 2010). Recently, Nepal decided to shift from a unitary system towards federalism after the promulgation of the new constitution and three levels (i.e., local, provincial and national) of elections. Under the new constitution, education management responsibilities are shared between different layers of the government, ensuring the education attainment right of the citizen and thus developing and empowering citizens. However, implementation of the federalization in Nepal is in infant stage, so it is too early to discuss its effect on the quality of education.

Methodology

This is a literature review-based article that employs the document analysis method. Nepal’s historical perspectives on school management, and literature related to the government’s policy shift to transfer school management to local communities have been discussed. The student achievement scores from the Government of Nepal’s National Assessment of Student Achievement (NASA) reports have been discussed and analyzed in order to draw conclusion on the role of school-based management to improve education quality in Nepal. This paper delimits the discussion on the status of student achievement results focusing on evidence-based secondary data and the practice of more than a decade long decentralization of school management in Nepal. Firstly, a historical perspective of decentralization of school management in Nepal is discussed in the following sections in order to set the background. Secondly, the paper discusses the scores of student achievement assessments carried out by the Government of Nepal. Finally, this paper summarizes points concerning the decentralization paradox in general, and the incompatibility between educational policies and practices in particular taking the reference of the transfer of school management to local communities and its effect on student achievement.

Results

Hanushek, Jamison, Jamison, and Woessmann (2008) stated that education does not just mean going to school, but also comprises of learning to achieve economic growth. They suggested measuring the performance of students on tests of key subjects, like math and science, for estimating a country’s human capital, as it estimates the average level of “cognitive skills” of the workforce of a country. Thus, in order to improve the “cognitive skills,” schools should be held responsible and accountable to the students and the local

community. School-based management can play a vital role to enhance student outcomes, as parents who are also members of the local community demand quality education for their children.

Under the school-based management system, the authorities are decentralized from the central government at the school level (Caldwell, 2005, as cited in World Bank, 2009). As cited in World Bank (2009), Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz (1990) stated:

School-based management can be viewed conceptually as a formal alteration of governance structures, as a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority as the primary means through which improvement might be stimulated and sustained. (p. 290)

The school-based management theory states that the management of schools by the local community is more sustainable in comparison to school management by central government. According to Hanushek and Woessmann (2007), student achievement is mainly affected by three incentives: choice and competition, school autonomy, and school accountability. Transferring the role of school management to the local community is a form of school decentralization, done in order to ensure school autonomy and school accountability.

Centralization versus Decentralization of Education Sector in Nepal

According to Shrestha (2014), the government has remained in confusion while formulating education policies, specifically in terms of the management of schools. Local communities had actively supported the development of education before the centralization of the education system in Nepal. In that process, the communities themselves initiated the opening and management of schools for their children, which had incredible results in Nepal's education system. With the intention to centralize Nepal's education system, schools across the country were nationalized along with the adoption of the National Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971. According to the plan, the state began to intervene in every domain, reducing the community's role in education (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2006). However, centralization of the education system was unsuccessful due to political instability and a lack of ownership among local stakeholders. Thereafter, policymakers soon realized that the nationalization of community schools was a flawed plan and that the community role in schools is mandatory for the improvement of the education system. The seventh amendment of the 2001 Education Act was a clear recognition of the fact that public schools have failed to meet the expectations of the public with regards to the improvement of quality in education. It accordingly paved the way for launching a major reform initiative in school education – the transfer of school management back to the local community – in 2002 (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 2008). In summary, the transfer of school management to the local community was a way of shifting the focus from centralized management to community-controlled and school-based planning and management (Department of Education [DoE], 2011).

The main intention of the Nepalese government to transfer school management back to the local community was to improve the quality of education, but this has not occurred as envisaged. One can argue that the government only partially transferred authority to the local communities for the management of schools. For instance, as part of the

decentralization of the education system, the government decided to provide grants as an incentive to transfer the management of schools to local communities. The government even did not realize that full financing from the central level and no funding from the local level were incompatible in the decentralization of an education system, and therefore cannot function efficiently or effectively (Shrestha, 2014, p. 21).

The another reason for adopting the decentralization of education was that the Nepalese government signed international commitments for the expansion of school education and the achievement of targets set for universal primary education after the popular movement and restoration of Nepal's democracy in 1990. The commitments made by the government of Nepal helped to increase support from development partners, which led to the decentralization of school management systems, and an open market policy for private education (Khanal, 2013). However, due to a lack of ownership from stakeholders, the transfer of school management to local communities could not initially gather momentum. In order to expedite the process, the Government of Nepal launched the Community School Support Project (CSSP) in 2003, with the aim of increasing the role of parents in School Management Communities (SMCs). As a result, the government managed to transfer the management of 12,471 schools (out of 34,837 school levels) to local communities by 2015 (Department of Education [DoE], 2016).

Moreover, transferring school management to local communities has shown some positive signs of improvement in educational indicators. For instance, Nepal has made notable improvement in the area of access to education in the last decade. The primary school enrolment rate, which is one of the indicators for educational outcome, reached around 97% in 2016 (Department of Education [DOE], 2016), up from 82% in 2002 (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2003). The dropout rate has also reduced significantly from 21% in 2003 down to 5% in 2016/2017 (Department of Education [DoE], 2016). Table 1 presents some of the highlights for educational indicators as of 2015/2016:

Table 1. Highlights of educational indicators (as of 2015/2016)

Educational Indicators	2003	2015/2016	Change in Percentage
NER in Primary Education	82.4%	96.6%	14.2%
Promotion in Grade 1	49.3%*	81.5%	32.2%
Dropout	20.9%*	4.8%	-16.1%
Repetition rate in Grade 1	29.8%*	13.7%	-16.1%

Source: Department of Education [DoE] (2016); *Data of 2006

However, a glance at school dropout rates, grade repetition rates and comparisons of achievement test scores with other countries shows that the overall quality of education is still a cause for concern (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2002).

Status of Student Achievement in Nepal

The government-run community-managed schools are yet to come forward to provide quality education to improve student achievement. An assessment of the community school support project reveals that student achievement has improved more in community-managed schools than in schools yet to be transferred to the community. Table 2 presents the differences in scores for community schools and community-managed schools.

Table 2. Student Achievement in Community Managed School

School	Nepali	English	Math	Social Studies	Science	Health
Community School (not transferred)	43.8	35.6	30.4	52.3	47.1	46.5
Community-managed School	45.1	37.5	33.4	55.0	49.2	49.4
Difference in score	1.3	1.9	3.0	2.7	2.1	2.9

Source: World Bank (2010)

However, the findings of NASA reports reveal that improvement in student achievement is not satisfactory in spite of impressive improvement in the net enrolment rate for primary and secondary education (Education Review Office [ERO], 2015). On the one hand, the transfer of school management to local communities was ineffectively implemented due to a lack of ownership from stakeholders. On the other hand, it has not brought about better results in terms of student achievement.

The government of Nepal's NASA report stated that the average student's achievement is lower in community schools than in institutional schools. The latest findings on the national assessment of student achievement revealed that the average score of student achievement varied, ranging from 53% to 63% in grades three and five and 35% to 49% in grade eight (Education Review Office [ERO], 2015). In mathematics, students' achievement scores at institutional schools were 57%, whereas students of community schools scored only 26% (Department of Education [DoE], 2016). Nevertheless, the performance of community schools and institutional schools are not comparable due to differences in the facilities available (Regmi, 2016).

Furthermore, an analysis of student achievement of grade three and five by school type show a considerable gap between community schools and institutional schools in terms of average student achievement scores between 2011 and 2015. Institutional schools performed better in comparison to community schools, but the achievement scores of both community schools and institutional schools decreased in 2015 compared to 2012. Table 3 presents student achievement of grades three and five by school type in 2012 and 2015.

Table 3. Student Achievement of Grades 3 and 5 by School Type (%)

School type	Grade	Mathematic		Nepali		English	
		2012	2015	2012	2015	2012	2015
Community Schools	3	54	41	57	46	N/A	N/A
Institutional Schools	3	75	54	80	67	N/A	N/A
Community Schools	5	49	45	54	43	66	38
Institutional Schools	5	67	61	78	61	83	73

Source: (ERO, 2016)

Table 4 presents the student achievement of grade eight by school type in 2011 and 2015. The results reveal that the average student achievement score at institutional schools is substantially higher than for community schools. The average scores of community school declined in both Mathematics and Nepali in 2013. In the case of institutional schools, the

average achievement scores for Mathematics decreased from 39% in 2011 down to 26% in 2013. In the Nepali subject, the average achievement score increased slightly, up from 62% in 2011 to 65% in 2013.

Table 4. Average Student Achievement of Grade 8 by School Type (%)

School type	Mathematics		Nepali		Social Studies	Science
	2011	2013	2011	2013	2011	2013
<i>N</i>	48,682	44,067	48,682	44,067	48,682	44,067
Community Schools	39	26	46	42	46	34
Institutional Schools	63	57	62	65	63	57

Source: Education Review Office [ERO] (2016)

Discussion and Conclusion

It is arguable that the transfer of school management to local communities has not been fully implemented in the real sense, and that the expected improvement in student achievement has not been observed due to incompatibility between policies and practices (i.e., decentralization paradox). The transfer of school management to the local communities itself is a good practice, as community involvement in reforming school education has shown quality improvement and sustainable development (Education Journalist Group [EJG], 2003). However, quality improvement in education has not been observed in the case of Nepal due to incompatibilities between policy and practice in the decentralization of the education sector.

Dury and Levin (1994) stated that school-based management contributes to four “intermediate” results: (i) increased efficiency in the use of resources and personnel in terms of operational efficiency; (ii) increased professionalism of teachers; (iii) reforms in the implementation of curriculum; and (iv) increased parental and community engagement. These four “intermediate” results in turn have the “potential” to lead to improvements in student achievement, reduce dropout rates, increase attendance rate and reduce disciplinary actions to students. The status of four “intermediate” results in the case of Nepal are discussed in the following.

Increased efficiency in the use of resources and personnel in terms of operational efficiency

There are mainly two types of efficiency: technical efficiency and allocative efficiency. “Technical efficiency” means arranging constrained resources in order to produce the maximum possible output; whereas, “allocative efficiency” refers to the use of resources in such a way that most possible output is produced (Froomkin, Jamison, & Radner, 1976). In other words, allocative efficiency means “doing the right things” and technical efficiency means “doing things right” (RTI International, 2010, p. 3). In the case of Nepal, the policy shift towards the transfer of school management to the local community formulated at the macro level lack both technical efficiency and allocative efficiency. For instance, the Nepalese government decided to transfer the management of schools without adequate discussion among the concerned stakeholders. The decision to transfer school management was resisted by the teachers and also by other stakeholders. The government could not even

convince the agitated parties. It is very important that the government formulates policies based on local needs in order to increase efficiency in the use of resources and personnel in terms of operational efficiency.

Increased professionalism of teachers

The transfer of school management to local communities has helped to increase professionalism of teachers to some extent. For instance, teacher absenteeism has significantly reduced while teaching-learning has gained momentum after handing over school management to the communities, which can be accredited to regular local monitoring and supervision (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2006). As previously indicated, student enrollment rate was found to have an increasing trend in community-managed schools, and a decreasing trend in institutional schools (Department of Education [DoE], 2008). However, this only represents access to education and not student achievement, which is more essential for the formation of human capital.

Reform in implementation of curriculum

The purpose of drafting a curriculum is not merely concerned with grades, but should follow UNESCO's four principles; "learning to know," "learning to do," "learning to be," and "learning to live together" (Ministry of Education and Sports [MOE], 2005, p. 1). This is why the Education Act provisioned for local curricula taking in account that "a single piece of stitched cloth may not be fit for all" (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development [CERID], 2009, p. 1). The national curriculum framework for school education strongly emphasizes the involvement of parents, teachers and local individuals as key agents for the development and implementation of local curricula. This framework has provided adequate space so that parents, local authorities and learners may incorporate their local language, content and practices into subject matter. It focuses on "valuing and including the understandings and knowledge of all children and ensuring that learning opportunities are not restricted for any reason like gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, socio-economic status and regional origin" (MOE, 2005, p. 22).

In addition, according to Doll (1993), the curriculum should address the needs of an open system as opposed to a closed view. The closed view of curriculum is dominated by a linear framework and scientific rationale, which ignore the subjective reality of the learner and the context. The curriculum in the post-modern era focuses on equitable inclusion of the diverse reality and context the learner is living in. The transfer of school management to local authorities is therefore good practice with respect to the post-modern perspective. However, practicing of the policy shift towards the transference of school management to local communities is weak, which is hindering the improvement of student management in Nepal.

Increased parents and community engagement

The results of the student achievement assessments carried out by the Education Review Office in 2012 and 2015 revealed that students who had support from their parents and had access to additional tuition classes obtained higher scores in achievement tests than those who did not benefit from such opportunities. Therefore, it is argued that support from family positively affects student achievement (Education Review Office [ERO], 2016).

Similarly, active community participation also helps to improve the learning environment in schools.

This paper concludes that the transfer of school management to local communities is not truly school-based management, and that the government of Nepal only *partially* transferred authority to the local communities for the management of schools. The government has yet to move forward with the improvement in quality of education through decentralized education, as the District Education Offices at the local level and Department of Education at the central level are still heavily involved in the management of community-managed schools. There has been minimal effect of school decentralization on student achievement, though there has been considerable improvement in access to education. This is as a result of the poor management of schools, incapable school leadership, and the unavailability of textbooks, among others reasons. Policy reform should be driven by demands which can be ensured through the participatory management of schools, a process that includes consultative decision-making, the accommodation of interests of diverse stakeholders, and strong commitment of both school leaders and bureaucrats.

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