Chapter 9

CENTRALIZED DECENTRALIZATION IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

One current global trend in educational reform is the decentralization of national education systems. Decentralization has been promoted by UNESCO, the World Bank, and other multilateral and bilateral assistance agencies for a number of years (McGinn, 1997). The growing interest in decentralization arises from the realization that many education systems, particularly those in the Third World, have expanded rapidly, making it increasingly difficult to plan and administer all education activities effectively and efficiently from the center. Support for decentralization has become so widespread that even highly centralized countries like Malaysia and Singapore have endorsed initiatives that aim to decentralize aspects of their education systems. This chapter analyzes the most prominent decentralization measures that have been undertaken in Malaysia over the past two decades. These initiatives include the establishment of District Education Offices, reforms calling for the decentralization of the national curriculum, and the privatization of higher education. Malaysia provides an interesting case because although the central government has publicly supported numerous decentralization programs, it has been reluctant to relinquish its authority over the schools. In short, the form is there but not the substance.

Advocates of decentralization have offered a long list of reasons for the redistribution of authority in the planning and administration of education. In general, there are three main motives for decentralization, namely, (i) to maintain a politically legitimate dispersal of authority, (ii) to render good quality of services, and (iii) to optimize efficient use of resources (Lauglo, 1995). Under the political legitimacy rationalization, decentralization is aimed at widening the participation in decision-making on educational matters to different agencies, groups, and stakeholders. Decentralization policies may be used to diffuse political dissent or to seek alternative resources in providing finance for education. Under the quality and efficiency rationales, decentralization can be a means of increasing effectiveness by moving control over the schools closer to the parents and communities and making education more responsive to local problems and needs.

Debate on centralization and decentralization usually revolves around the issue of who controls and who ought to control education. Education is a contested terrain and it is often a site of struggle among different groups, particularly in a multiethnic country like Malaysia. Decentralization can take the forms of political decentralization or administrative decentralization. Political decentralization is driven by questions about who has the right to make decisions about educational matters,

Christopher Bjork (ed.), Educational Decentralization, 149–158.

including issues related to the funding of schools. Administrative decentralization, in contrast, involves the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and the allocation of resources from higher levels in an official hierarchy to lower ones. According to Rondinelli (1990), there are three major forms of administrative decentralization, namely, deconcentration, delegation, and devolution. Privatization is another form of decentralization although privatization may centralize control, albeit in non-governmental bodies (Bray, 1999). It is important to note that these forms of decentralization are not mutually exclusive, and that many government structures do consist some combination of these various forms. Furthermore, it is also possible for an education system to be structurally centralized and decentralized at the same time.

The aim of this chapter is to examine how the highly centralized education system in Malaysia has taken steps to decentralize and to consider how the above theory applies to the Malaysian case. The chapter examines some of the structural and functional changes that have occurred as a result of both political and administrative decentralization. It discusses:

- How deconcentration from the State Education Department (SED) occurred by analyzing the roles and functions of the District Education Officer (DEO)
- How delegation took place between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the State Education Department (SED) in the implementation of a recent national curriculum reform
- How power to provide and responsibility to finance higher education has been devolved to the private sector through legislation

The discussion focuses on what kinds of decision have been relocated at which level, the readiness of the people concerned to make these decisions, and what actually happened in reality despite the rhetoric.

2. CENTRAL CONTROL OF EDUCATION

Malaysia is a multiethnic society with a population of 22.2 million, of which 58% are Bumiputra,[1] 35% Chinese, and 7% Indians. A former British colony, the nation gained political independence in 1957. During the colonial period, the provision of education was highly decentralized. The education system was divided into four streams: (1) vernacular Malay schools, most of which were primary schools established to serve rural Malay children; (2) Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools, which were set up by the Chinese and Indian communities; (3) English schools maintained by the British government; (4) Christian missionaries that served the mixed urban population.

When Malaysia was incorporated in 1963, it became a federation comprised of the peninsular states as well as the former British colonies of Singapore,[2] Sabah and Sarawak. The government of Malaysia consisted of the central or federal government at the top tier, the state governments at the middle tier, and the local authorities at the bottom tier. The Malaysian constitution delineated functions between the federal and state governments. Education, along with other public services like health, defense, and finance, fell under the jurisdiction of the Federal government (Wee, 1996).

Adoption of the 1961 Education Act led to the establishment of a national education system characterized by a common language,[3] common school curriculum, common public examinations, common teaching service scheme, and central funding

for all schools in the public system. Through centralized bureaucratization, the ruling coalition government gained tight control over the education system by integrating the Chinese and Tamil schools into the national system, phasing out the use of English language as a medium of instruction, and establishing an administrative structure that was directly controlled by the Ministry of Education. The overriding aim of the national education policy was to integrate its multiethnic population and to bring about social cohesion and national unity. To achieve this aim, a highly centralized education system was established based on the rationale that the "centralized management system ensures optimal use of physical resources and available expertise in the education sector as well as prevents wasteful duplication of duties" (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1980, p. 141).

During the early years of independence, the centralized administrative structure was divided into three levels in Peninsular Malaysia and four levels in Sabah and Sarawak. There were the national, state, and school levels in the peninsular states and an additional division level (which is higher than the district level) in the Bornean states because of their larger sizes. However, an extra administrative layer was added at the district level in all the states in 1982. I discuss this initial move toward decentralization by deconcentration to the district level in greater detail in the following section. This centralized administrative structure is used to manage all the schools and other institutions in the national education system.[4] The administrative structure of the national system is characterized by its standardization and bureaucratization. Central control and provision of education is deemed desirable in making an education of reasonable quality available to all children in the country.

3. DECONCENTRATION TO THE DISTRICT LEVEL

A brief review of the administrative structure shows that at the national level the Ministry of Education is responsible for the formulation of education policies, overall planning, the control of all matters related to finance and expenditure, planning and implementing physical development, developing school curriculum, recruitment, training, and posting of teachers. The ultimate aim of the Ministry of Education is to ensure that the national education system, in accordance with the 1961 Education Act (and later 1995 Education Act), supports the government's primary objective of national unity.

The State Education Department (SED) in each state answers directly to the Ministry of Education. The SED functions as a regional agency, regularly receiving directives from the center. It implements all the educational programs in schools within the state. In addition, the SED manages, monitors, and supervises all matters concerning curriculum, schools, teachers, students, as well as public funds received from the center. Each school is headed by a principal or head teacher, whose role is to implement all the educational programs stipulated by the Ministry of Education, supervise, and guide teachers to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in schools, monitor and supervise students' welfare with respect to their education, and establish good and effective relations with parents and the community (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1980).

However, as the number of schools, students, and teachers grew, the volume of work at the state level also increased and became more complex. There was an

obvious need to provide an intermediary between the state level and the school level of administration. Therefore, in 1982, district education offices were established so as to facilitate administration and to liase between the schools and the SEDs. The number of district education offices in each state varied according to the size of the state. For example, there are only three district education offices in Penang but nine in Perak. In general, fewer schools are located in the rural districts than in the urban areas, but the rural schools tend to be further apart, and the communication infrastructure is less developed in the rural districts.

The roles and functions of the District Education Officers (DEOs) are mainly supervisory, managing information, and carrying out routine tasks. The DEOs supervise the schools, teachers, and pupils at the ground level; they also establish good relations with parents and communities. They collect data on schools, teachers, and students (such as the number of teachers who request transfer) and pass that information to the SEDs, which use the information to make decisions. The DEOs also disseminate information concerning rules and regulations from the SED to schools. In addition, they carry out routine tasks, such as maintaining school facilities and monitoring public examinations.

How effective are the DEOs in carrying out their duties? Research on this question indicates that that the DEOs tend to spend more time handling administrative matters than professional matters (Mohamad Kombali, 2000). More often than not they lack the professional skills and know-how that is required in data analysis, educational supervision, and professional development of teachers. The DEOs are not usually involved in decisions made at the SED. They are not provided with an overview of the development of education at the state or even the district level. It is, therefore, very difficult for them to make plans for schools or teachers. For example, it has been reported that the DEOs have been asked to organize in-service courses for the teachers in their districts at the end of the year only because there was some money left over in the state budget at the end of the year (from interview with a DEO on September 25, 2001).

The establishment of District Education Offices is a structural change whereby routine tasks have been deconcentrated from the state level so as to cut down red tape, to facilitate better exchange of information, and to relieve officers at the SEDs of routine tasks so that they can plan, supervise, and strategize more effectively. In restructuring the administrative system, it is quite easy to create education offices in all the districts, transfer personnel to these offices, and assign them certain roles and functions. In actuality, most of the appointed DEOs are drawn from a pool of schoolteachers who have limited experience in administration and supervision. For these DEOs to be effective in their new roles and functions, they need to receive proper training in professional skills like managing information system, educational supervision, managing the curriculum, personnel management, and staff development. It is hoped that deconcentration will prompt the DEOs to use their professional judgment in carrying out directives from the center at the local level. Therefore, increased attention needs to be given to the professional training of these DEOs.

It is interesting to note that the establishment of District Education Offices throughout the country has not led to increased popular participation in local decision-making in educational matters such as curriculum, hiring and firing of teachers, and examinations. In the Malaysian context, the local district authority is very weak when

compared to the power of the state government. Ever since the 1960s, the election of local government has been suspended. All members of the municipal/district councils are now appointed by their respective state governments. Community participation in decision-making in school matters is mostly limited to fund-raising activities of parent–teacher associations and alumni associations, although in some very remote areas rural communities help with the construction of school buildings and teachers' quarters. The establishment of education offices at the district level has increased the level of central authority in outlying areas. As noted by Bray (1999), deconcentration can be used as a mechanism by the central ministry to exert tighter control on the periphery.

4. DELEGATION TO THE STATE LEVEL

The deconcentration of routine tasks from the SEDs to the district level took place a year before the Ministry of Education launched a major curriculum reform in the national school system. The New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR)[5] was implemented progressively starting from Year 1 to Year 6, and the full cycle took 6 years (from 1983 to 1988) to complete. As a continuation of this major reform, the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM)[6] was also implemented progressively, from 1989 until 1993. Both the KBSR and KBSM were centrally developed by the Curriculum Development Center under the Ministry of Education. These are national curricula, which do not allow for any locally designed subject matter. However, the Ministry of Education decided to delegate authority and responsibility over implementation of these programs to the SEDs. The SEDs, together with other divisions in the Ministry of Education, were asked to coordinate and manage curricular revisions. Both the KBSM and the KBSR were implemented based on "the principle of decentralization whereby various sections will be given specific tasks and responsibilities. The aim is to encourage involvement and full participation by the states, districts, and schools" (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1983, p. 6).

The SEDs, which had previously followed policy directives from central authorities, were suddenly asked to take on a more active role in implementing curricular reform. New responsibilities assigned to the SEDs included financial management, deployment of staff, preparation of school facilities, in-service preparation for new teachers, and sustenance of new curricula in schools (Azizah, 1987). The SEDs devised their own plans and strategies for disseminating, implementing, and sustaining the curriculum innovations. As there is a wide range of differences among the schools in terms of facilities, resources, leadership, and teachers' qualities, the SEDs were expected to use discretion in decision-making (Noor Azmi, 1988). Each state, district, and school was encouraged to develop its own instructional materials to complement those developed by the center.

A "cascade strategy" was employed to orient and familiarize teachers with the new curriculum and teaching methods advocated by the curriculum developers. Experienced and competent teachers designated as Key Personnel (KP)[7] were selected from each state to attend in-service training at the national level. During these in-service programs, the KPs attended lectures, workshops, and demonstrations, and were provided hands-on experience in preparing instructional materials. On completion of these programs, the KPs returned to their respective states and districts where

they, with the help of the respective SEDs, conducted similar courses for practicing teachers. In theory, the cascade strategy should have had a multiplier effect, with information being disseminated in the quickest possible time. However, this strategy was found to be quite ineffective because information and key ideas in KBSR were not properly disseminated to schoolteachers and head teachers. This was partly due to the limited time allocated for the in-service programs, both at the national and state levels. There was a tendency for "message dilution and distortion" as the information was filtered down to the schoolteachers (Siti Hawa, 1986).

To overcome these weaknesses, a different strategy was adopted for the implementation of KBSM. The in-house training model was used to orientate teachers to changes in the KSBM curriculum. For example, selected teachers, designated as resource persons (KS),[8] were trained at the national level and then sent back to their respective states to disseminate the information. The KSs were furnished with training packages that included syllabi documents, guidebooks, sample lesson plans, and video recordings of sample lessons. Similar packages were also distributed to each and every school. School principals were directed to organize in-house training sessions for the teachers, with the help of the KS, based in their schools using the training packages developed at the center. It was hoped that the in-house training model would help to overcome the problem of "message dilution and distortion." These training packages also served as self-access modules, which teachers could use at their own pace. However, problems still arose. The self-access module did not address the theoretical underpinnings of the syllabi or suggested pedagogy. Teachers were exposed to a variety of tools they could use in their classrooms, but did not develop an understanding of the philosophy that grounded them. Furthermore, these training packages were standardized and did not take into account varying competencies among teachers or contextual differences that exist among schools (Nalliah & Thiyagarajah, 2000).

Many of the SEDs adopted a centralized approach for preparing school facilities to implement the curricular reforms. Suppliers contracted at the state level provided schools with teaching materials and equipments necessary to implement new curricula. Education officials believed that this strategy would ensure that schools located in rural and remote areas would receive adequate supplies and support materials. However, very often the support materials supplied to schools were either irrelevant or inadequate. In some cases, there was insufficient supply of some items and oversupply of other items. For example, some schools received a glut of manila cards and physical education equipment but lacked other essential items, such as cyclostyling paper and stencils (Noor Azmi, 1988). These problems could be traced to the actions of state level officers, who rarely knew exactly what supplies different schools needed at different points in time.

On the whole, implementation of the national curriculum reform through delegation of authority and responsibilities to the state level had its own share of problems. Even though the implementation was decentralized, teachers and officers at the periphery did not respond to this strategy positively. They seemed to be shackled by the traditional practice of waiting for directives from the center rather than willing to make independent decision (Azizah, 1987). A significant amount of autonomy over the delivery of the curriculum was given to the teachers. However, most of the teachers were not able to or did not want to use that autonomy. They preferred to

rely on specific instructions from the top so as to avoid the risk of being accused of doing something wrong. On the other hand, some officers at the top were reluctant to relinquish their authority to their staff at the lower levels because they lacked confidence in their subordinates. Thus, the highly centralized system in Malaysia resulted in "dysfunctional consequences" among the staff because those at the regional and local levels became unresourceful and overdependent on directives and guidelines from the center (Noor Azmi, 1988). Although much of the decision-making pertaining to the implementation of the national curriculum reform has been delegated to the state level, there is no point in moving decisions to the site of action if the local actors are not competent in making those decisions.

5. DEVOLUTION TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Another recent education reform involved the privatization of higher education: the Ministry of Education decentralized financial responsibilities for higher education to the private sector. This was a political move on the part of the Malaysian government to meet excess demands for higher education. In 1991, the extension of free basic education from 9 years to 11 years resulted in a rapid expansion of upper secondary education. Consequently, demand for higher education also increased, but could not be met by the public sector due to fiscal constraints. The problem was further exacerbated by an ethnic quota policy whereby admission to public institutions of higher learning was based on a ratio of 55:45 for Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students. As a result of this ethnic quota policy, many qualified non-Bumiputra students were denied admission to public universities and polytechnics; large numbers of such students decided to seek further education overseas. But escalating overseas tuition fees limited access to overseas education to students from wealthy families. Hence, political pressure was brought to bear on the Malaysian government to liberalize policies on private education, especially at the post-secondary level. To meet the increasing demand for higher education and in light of the government fiscal conditions, the Ministry of Education devolved part of its financial responsibility to provide higher education to the private sector.

In the years that followed, the number of private institutions increased dramatically, from 156 in 1992 to about 707 in 2002. The upsurge in private universities was even more dramatic, from 0 in 1995 to 12 in 2001 (Lee, 2001). In 1999, 43% of the total number of students enrolled at the tertiary level attended private institutions. Various kinds of private institutions of higher learning, both for-profit and non-profit, emerged. The key players in private higher education included government corporations, private companies, public listed companies, and individual proprietors. Foundations, philanthropic organizations, and communities also set up non-profit educational institutions. To mobilize and optimize resources for higher education, various forms of partnerships were established between government, non-government organizations, private enterprises, local communities, and religious groups. In addition, a number of foreign universities like Monash University and Curtin University from Australia opened branch campuses in Malaysia.

To date, a host of programs, ranging from pre-university level to post-graduate level, have been offered by these private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The PHEIs are well known for their ability to experiment and innovate with different

kinds of programs so as to offer more choices to their customers; they are also very fast in responding to market demands.[9] It is interesting to note that most of the PHEIs offer programs in disciplines such as accounting, law, business studies, and computer studies, all of which are very popular with both local and foreign students. Unlike the public institutions of higher learning, most instruction at the PHEIs is provided in English, which has attracted a substantial number of foreign students from neighboring countries like Indonesia, China, and Thailand. As for local students, the PHEIs attract mostly non-Bumiputra students who cannot gain admission into the public institutions because of the ethnic quota policy.

In 1996, the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, which defined the government's regulatory control over all the private educational institutions in the country, was passed. Under the Act, establishment of all private institutions and special educational programs requires prior approval from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, all instruction must be conducted in the national language, although with prior approval from the Ministry of Education some courses can be taught in English or Arabic. All private educational institutions were required to offer a number of compulsory subjects, such as Bahasa Malaysia, Malaysian studies, Islamic studies (for Muslims), and Moral studies (for non-Muslims). This legislation gave the Ministry of Education greater control over the kinds of private educational institutions that could be established and the kinds of educational programs that could be offered. To formalize the government's supervisory role, the National Accreditation Board Act was also passed in 1996. This act called for the establishment of a national accreditation board that would formulate policies related to the standard and quality of courses of study, certificates, diplomas, and degrees conferred by the private educational institutions.

In privatizing higher education, the Malaysian government managed to transfer some of its financial burden to the private sector. Although the Ministry of Education devolved a portion of its financial responsibilities to non-government organizations, the Ministry of Education did not relinquish total control over the provision of higher education. Instead, the Ministry retained supervisory powers over private educational institutions, and maintained joint responsibility for the financing higher education with the private sector. By allowing private educational institutions to be set up in the country, the Malaysian government gained political legitimacy through the widening of access to higher education.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite the adoption of several decentralization initiatives, the Malaysian education system remains centralized, with authority heavily concentrated at the Ministry of Education. The establishment of district education offices resulted in a shift of workloads, but not a meaningful transfer of authority from the state level to the district level. In the case of implementing national curriculum reform, the Ministry of Education initially delegated authority to the state level but later reclaimed that authority. As for private higher education, financial responsibility and authority was redistributed to the private sector, but the Ministry of Education retained control over licensing and accreditation of private institutions of higher education. All of these decentralization initiatives were aimed at improving the efficiency and quality

of education as well as gaining political legitimacy by widening access to higher education.

Yet these measures did not always produce their intended results. My analysis of efforts to decentralize education in Malaysia raises a series of important questions about the effectiveness of decentralization reforms: Are upper level officials willing to relinquish power to lower levels of the system? Are officers and teachers working at the lower levels prepared to exercise their newly acquired authority or to carry out their new roles and functions? How enthusiastic is the private sector when it comes to collaborating with the government in the provision of higher education? The outcomes of these decentralization policies show that, despite some initial difficulties, the DEOs are assisting the SEDs in supervising and monitoring the schools and teachers; in other words, spreading the power and influence of the central authority to the peripheral regions. The SEDs have completed the implementation of the national curriculum reforms and are sustaining the new curricula in schools, but most of the authority pertaining to school curriculum has been reclaimed by the center. The private sector is playing a very active part in the provision of higher education, but the central government exerts a great deal of control over the PHEIs. As a result, the PHEIs lack the authority to make decisions related to medium of instruction, subjects to be taught, types of programs, and kinds of certification offered in the schools. Contrary to common belief, the decentralization initiatives in Malaysia have not relaxed the tight control of the Malaysian government over the provision and delivery of education at all levels in the country.

NOTES

1. "Bumiputra" means "native of the soil" and this term is used to include the Malays and other indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak.
2. Singapore broke away from the federation in 1965.
3. The national language, Malay language, is the sole medium of instruction in schools.
4. Private schools like the Chinese Independent schools, religious schools, and expatriate schools are outside the national education system.
5. The New Primary School Curriculum is commonly known as Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) in Malaysia.
6. The Integrated Secondary School Curriculum is known as Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) in Malaysia.
7. The key personnel are known as Kakitangan Penting (KP) in Malaysia.
8. Resource persons are referred to as Kakitangan Sumber (KS) in Malaysia.
9. Some of the innovative programs include the twinning programs and the credit–transfer programs where students are able to do part or the whole of a foreign degree program in one of the local PHEIs.

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