



RESEARCH PAPER

**Empowering Schools, Engaging Communities: School Principals' Experiences of Educational Decentralization in Punjab, Pakistan**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the effects of educational decentralization in Punjab, Pakistan, through the perspective of public-school principals in the Sheikhpura district. This study explores decentralization of education in Punjab, Pakistan, and its impact on school governance and education. Despite the reforms of 18 constitutional amendments, challenges like limitation of resources, weak accountability, and administrative issues still there, which affect the school education system. The study explore these issues from the perspective of a public school principal in the district of Sheikhpura of Punjab, Pakistan. A qualitative approach has been used in which semi-structured interviews with 20 public school principals in the district of Sheikhpura were conducted. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis using Principal Agent theory and Resource dependency Theory. The results show increased local decision-making and community engagement, but there were still problems with bureaucratic inadequacies, inadequate access to resources, limited financial autonomy, and an unclear authority system. Transparent accountability, equal resource distribution, a capacity-building program, and governance reforms are recommended to improve the outcomes of the decentralization.

**KEYWORDS** Educational Decentralization, School Governance, Public Administration, Qualitative Research, Educational Policy Reform

**Introduction**

Education plays a vital role in fostering human capital development by improving skills and capabilities, which in turn boost economic growth and societal progress. A strong and fair education system is essential for a country's advancement. However, Pakistan's education system faces major challenges, including low enrollment rates, poor-quality education, and inefficient use of resources (Ahmad et al., 2014). As Punjab, the most populous province in Pakistan, despite the 18th Constitutional Amendment granting provincial autonomy continues to struggle with issues related to educational access, quality, equity, and efficient decentralized execution, (Raza et al., 2024). Still, schools face low enrollment, high dropout rates, uneven resources, and learning gaps.

Pakistan is a federal country with three levels of government: local, provincial, and national. Each level plays a different function in service delivery and management. After the 18th Amendment, local governments encourage service delivery and community participation, the federal government is responsible of defense and foreign policy, and the provinces are responsible of infrastructure, education, and health (Maqsood, 2023)

Pakistan's education system continues to underperform despite its constitutional commitments. The quality of education remains poor, access to resources is uneven, and the literacy rate is about 60.6 percent (Government of Pakistan, 2025, p. 9). The Economic Survey of Pakistan 2024–2025 reports that federal and provincial governments spent only 0.8 percent of GDP on education, far below UNESCO's 4–6 percent target (Government of

Pakistan, 2025, p. 5). The same survey notes school enrollment at 24.6 million and 26 million children out of school in FY 2023. The 2023–2024 federal education budget allocated 97.1 billion rupees (1.7% of GDP) to general education, and just 4.5 billion rupees to pre-primary and primary education (Government of Pakistan, 2023, pp. 14–15). Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, has about 150 million people, or over 52% of the national population. Its public school system, the largest in South Asia, comprises 48,473 schools, including 32,344 primary, 7,226 middle, 8,077 high, and 814 higher secondary institutions. Of these, 22,935 are boys' and 25,538 are girls' schools. There are 282,745 classrooms, with 12 million students (roughly equal numbers of boys and girls) and 333,039 teachers. Among higher secondary schools, 85.5% have computer labs and 60.6% have science labs (Punjab School Education Department; PMIU-PESRP, 2024).

The 2000 Devolution Plan of Punjab strengthened educational decentralization by establishing District Education Coordinators and Officers. It reduced the burden on the central government, reinforced local decision-making, increased accountability and effectiveness, and encouraged community involvement and context-based educational management (Shah, 2010). Education officers' authority continued to be limited in Punjab despite decentralization actions because of capacity insufficiencies, insufficient community involvement, and District Coordination Officers' centralized financial control. Stronger leadership, more effective use of resources, and active community involvement are essential for decentralization to be successful in terms of accountability and better outcomes (A. M. Khan & Mirza, 2011).

In Pakistan, informal political selection and provincial control restrict district-level fiscal and administrative decentralization. Local interests are often given importance by district nazims, who are selected by union council members, which reduces overall accountability and transparency. Service delivery is weakened, and clientelism is promoted by this incomplete decentralization. This continues inadequacies and limits democratic accountability in local government systems, limiting the specified objectives of effective governance and improved public services (Ibeanusi, 2011).

Decentralization in education denotes to the transfer of decision-making authority from national to local authorities, containing school councils and district boards. By reducing bureaucracy and allowing context-specific decisions, it increases efficiency. By addressing students' needs, educators, parents, and local stakeholders can enhance responsibility and accountability. Moreover, it encourages community involvement and school resource provision. Furthermore, more flexible curriculum changes, teacher preparation, and resource distribution are made possible by localized governance, which improves the general quality and outcomes of education (Fakir & Arain, 2023).

Decentralization aims to enhance accountability, but its impact on equity and quality of education are still unclear. This study focuses at district-level governance in Punjab from the viewpoint of public school principals, assessing whether autonomy improves results or whether continuing issues at the local level still hinder advancement.

This study effects Punjab education policy and practice, by guiding district-level governance improvements and resource allocation. Moreover, to encourage accountability, transparency, and school empowerment, it brings attention to the duties, responsibilities, and difficulties faced by principals and contribute larger discussions about decentralized educational systems.

## **Literature Review**

In the context of administration, decentralization is the transfer of authority from leaders of new or existing institutions operating at the national level to either current regional and local entities or to develop regional and local units (Rondinelli et al., 1984).

Decentralization involves distributing or redistributing positions and authority; specifically, transferring authority from central to local authorities (Di Bona et al., 2023). It is recommended because it broadens decision-making power. Additionally, it is more accurate to describe decentralization as reducing the power of national government bodies by establishing local authorities and dissolving the central authority, thereby encouraging transparency and competition among the officially designated entities (Haider, 2022).

Decentralization, a multifaceted procedure that transfers power from the national government to local organizations and private actors, has become more popular globally in recent years. Through administrative reforms, it enhances service delivery, accountability, efficiency, resource mobilization, public involvement, and political stability in developing nations.

There are three levels to decentralization, a process by which authority is transferred from national to local levels of government. These include decentralization of the political, administrative, and financial levels. Decentralization can also be a strategy used by the government of one or more nations to work with non-governmental organizations, commercial groups, or private citizens. Its goals involve identifying domains of shared responsibility between the state and its partners, ensuring that everybody participates in decision-making, and allocating power and wealth among participants.

Decentralization, which often involves collaboration with non-governmental and corporate actors, shifts power from national to local levels through political, administrative, and financial dimensions. To enhance local involvement, Punjab executed multi-tier governance, union councils, comparative representation, and tehsil-based organizations under the Punjab Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2019. However, despite the objectives of reform, bureaucratic inadequacies, limited budgetary independence, continuing provincial authority, and inadequate resources continue to limit efficient local governance and hinder progress in public service delivery and educational performance (Ilahi & Khalid, 2022).

Local governance has been seen as a fundamental component of democracy since the time of John Stuart Mill (Hill, 2024). However, in the early 20th century, questions arose regarding whether local autonomy could coexist with the needs of a contemporary welfare state and a mass society. Local governments, according to critics, were insufficient in providing services and promoting democratic values. They argued that traditional local governance was outdated because national political parties, influential entities, and the media were better equipped to represent the needs and opinions of residents in a complex society (Hill, 2024). Decentralization often fails to encourage service delivery, transparency, and socioeconomic development in underdeveloped nations because of insufficient organizations, capacity restraints, and governance matters that hinder efficient execution and service quality (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

When it comes to taking on the duties of policymaking, resource mobilization, and program implementation, local governments are usually inadequate around the world (Myers, 2021). In the 1980s, a technical approach to policy development was strengthened by the focus on administrative direction for local governments that supported structural adjustment measures in many developing nations. Compared to the previous, more rigid administrative orientation, the management orientation offered the possibility of better government action. Promising developments included the deployment of local resources and problem-solving (Myers, 2021).

The decentralization of education in Brazil grants the provinces and districts authority over primary and secondary education. At the same time, the federal government administers higher education and provides guidelines related to the curriculum, ensuring interdependence rather than autonomy (Do Vale, 2016). Sweden encourages municipalities

in education by maintaining a balance between government monitoring and local authority. Under the direction of the Swedish National Agency for Education, teachers continue control over their lessons. Goal-based governance and the incorporation of preschool with compulsory education have been executed since the 1990s in an effort to increase quality and collaboration (Lane & Murray, 1985).

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 decentralized the education system, allowing all 17 autonomous Communities (ACs) to exercise jurisdiction by 2000, thereby creating a diverse system. The ACs manage curriculum development, school timings, and examinations. At the same time, the central government supervises the organization system, the central curriculum, and assessment. Political affiliation and limitation of central control (45% of the curriculum) delayed coordination and collaboration (Bonal et al., 2023).

Devolution in Pakistani educational governance is hard because of local corruption, political interference, and insufficient administrative capability. Moreover, because resource-rich places gain more from it, local disparity may deteriorate. Local authority is more forced by opposition from central authorities. International examples, however, show how community-based administration can lead to benefits. To guarantee that decentralization develops accountability, efficiency, and educational accomplishments, success requires capacity-building, equal resource distribution, and protection against political interference (Fakir & Arain, 2023).

Decentralization in Pakistan includes organizational, political, and economic dynamics. Professionals provide schools authority, boards of governors contain the community, and parents have an influence on education through financial donations. However, preserving a balance between central authority and local autonomy is still problematic and diverges as politics and policy evolve (A. M. Khan & Mirza, 2010).

## **Material and Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research is basic qualitative research, appropriate for capturing in-depth views, understanding complex situations, and analyzing diverse perspectives within the context. Qualitative research is an approach that integrates the analysis of any event or phenomenon, describing its quality, methods, and context, as well as the perspective from which it can be studied or analyzed.

### **Population and Sampling**

Sheikhpura, Punjab's school principals were selected because of their vital role in planning, budgeting, governance, and policy implementation. Since the researcher is a native and has made contacts through family relations, the district was specifically selected for accessibility.

### **Data collection method**

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the principals of district public schools in Sheikhpura, Punjab, Pakistan, and this is an agricultural and industrial area near Provincial Capital (Lahore) and has five tehsils. Sheikhpura has a diverse population that speaks Punjabi, Urdu, and English. The district has a total of 1152 public schools, which include 768 primary schools, 217 elementary schools, 149 secondary schools, and 18 higher secondary schools. From which 540 schools are for girls and 612 for boys (Government of Punjab, 2025). For data collection, a total of 20 principals were approached, out of which 16 were consented to participate in the study. These principles are approached through

personal contacts. Interviews were conducted with participants, mostly in formal office settings. The interviews were recorded, with a maximum duration of 45 minutes.

### Data Analysis

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study explored stakeholders' insights on decentralized education using an interpretive methodology. By linking first-order codes to higher-order themes and theoretical dimensions, the Gioia method made systematic coding possible and ensure transparent and organized theory development from interview data.

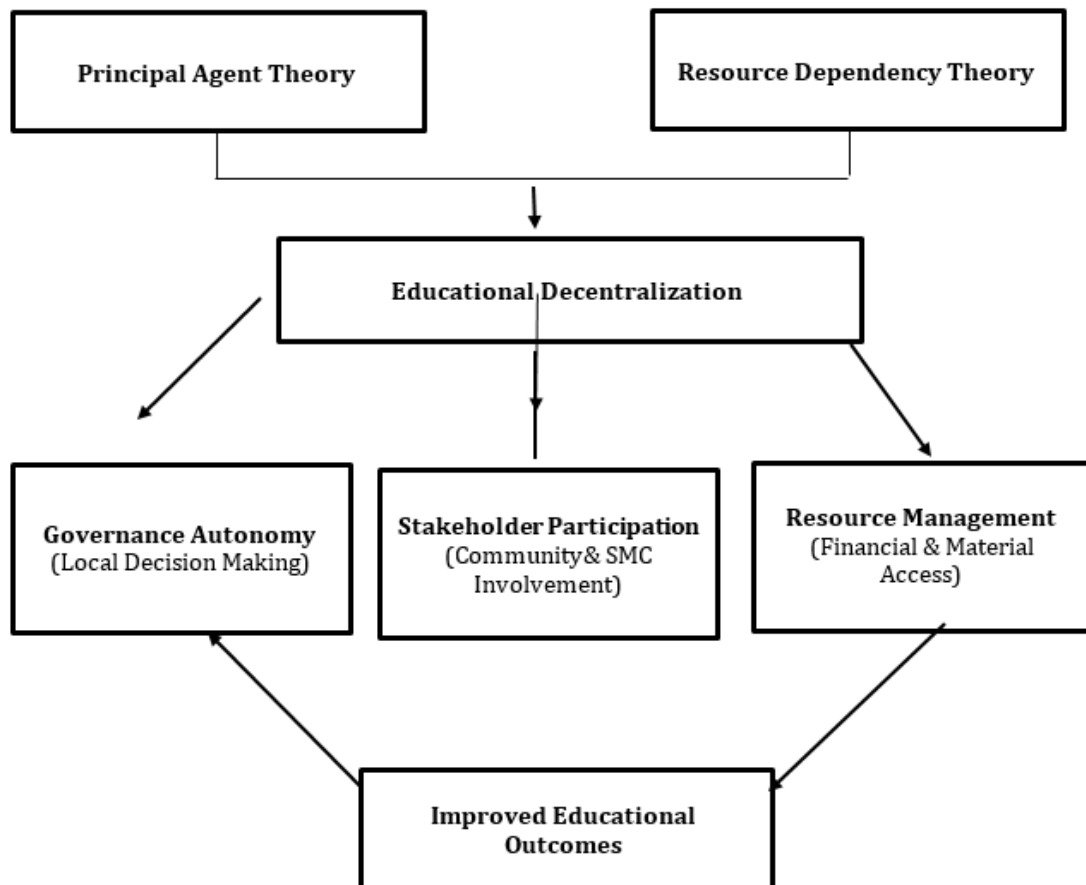


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework explains educational decentralization in Punjab using Principal-Agent Theory and Resource Dependency Theory. It links theoretical concepts to real-world governance outcomes in education by emphasizing the techniques that accountability, transparency, and delegating authority with equal resource distribution, financial autonomy, and decision-making authority.

The conceptual framework shows three main aspects of educational decentralization of Punjab, resource management, stakeholder participation, and governance autonomy. By allowing school principals to handle administrative and educational concerns according to local needs, governance autonomy increases accountability, transparency, and monitoring. By linking parents, teachers, school management committees, and community members in decision-making, stakeholder engagement nurtures cooperation and community-based support. The aim of resource management is to reduce the differences between urban and rural schools by assigning

financial and material resources in an equal and effective manner. Collectively, these factors enhance educational outcomes, school performance, and the efficacy of governance through well-managed systems.

Overall, higher educational quality and more robust local accountability contribute to better educational outcomes in Punjab. Transparent decision-making and encourage school management systems reinforce accountability.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Decentralization Effects on Local Governance**

Decentralization presents both challenges and opportunities for local education governance. Key findings suggest that decentralization enables schools to tailor decisions to local needs, particularly by enhancing curriculum relevance and improving student engagement. As one participant explained,

This change allows us to take a more personalized educational method, especially in curriculum development, where the socio-cultural needs of the local people are now better addressed. Decentralization helps us to develop and plan our teaching method according to the locally relevant context, which increases the relevance and interest among the students.

This autonomy allows schools to manage academic, financial, and administrative matters independently. It facilitates the resolution of issues such as student enrollment, resource shortages, and curriculum adaptation without requiring approval from higher authorities. This approach promotes more efficient governance and improved educational outcomes. Although autonomy is important, as one participant mentioned, "*it depends on capacity building and the allocation of appropriate resources to local authorities and school principals*". Many participants emphasized that decentralization provides the autonomy to address locally relevant issues more effectively, with one respondent noting that "*After decentralization, we resolve the matter in our way, and the problems in our area become fewer*" (P3).

Decentralization has also boosted participation by involving local stakeholders in decision-making, who play an active role in school activities through the School Management Committee (SMC). One participant highlighted that "Local stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and community members now have more influence on school operations due to decentralization, primarily through active participation in school councils and local education committees" (P6). However, another participant highlighted the challenges, stated,

The shift from centralized to decentralized governance frequently suffers from inefficient implementation of policies, ambiguity, and inadequate management. In some cases, local authorities lack the necessary training to handle the new responsibilities. Additionally, political interference creates hurdles in implementing the decentralized educational policies efficiently (P5).

### **Institutional and Policy Improvement**

Participants stressed the importance of adopting a balanced approach to meet parents' expectations, manage other stakeholders, and address students' needs. This creates an opportunity to connect directly with the community and adjust teaching methods based on their feedback. As one participant noted, "*Principals must deliberate carefully before making decisions, as they need to maintain the council members' trust while finding solutions that benefit all stakeholders*" (P12). Respondents indicated a need to strengthen the decentralized system, empowering both local authorities and schools to manage it

effectively. They reported that limited decision-making authority and delays in bureaucratic processes hinder their ability to solve problems related to school operations. Participants highlighted the need for broader implementation and stressed the government's stronger involvement in support. Collaborative policymaking, involving teachers, parents, local stakeholders, and the community, ensures relevance and effectiveness. They explained that effective decentralization connects policy and practice, significantly boosting community and school engagement by fostering cooperation in educational policies and problem-solving. As one participant stated, *"Decentralization has strengthened the community's spirit by fostering collaboration between members and educators"* (P12). However, some emphasized that this requires institutional support, training, and policies tailored to regional specificities. Local leadership is essential for empowering meaningful and sustainable improvements in the education system.

### **Decentralization and Stakeholder Inclusion in Punjab Education**

Participants emphasized that decisions made with community involvement and participation of diverse voices such as parents understanding their children's needs, teachers sharing teaching methods, and local community members explaining socio-cultural contexts creates opportunities for more balanced and context-aware approaches. As one participant stated, *"At the school level in Sheikhpura, decision-making processes have become more localized and inclusive, with greater involvement of head teachers, school councils, and community members in managing school affairs"* (P6). Moreover, including stakeholders in the process enhances accountability and transparency at the school level. Teachers become more attentive and aware of their activities, recognizing their responsibility to the authorities for their actions. This promotes greater overall responsibility compared to the past. One respondent said that *"School leaders are accountable for all aspects of operations, including resource management, educational quality, community involvement, and overall transparency"* (P12). These collaborative approaches contribute to educational policy development that is more relevant to local needs, more aligned with students' needs, and better connected to community goals.

### **Influence on the Quality of Education**

This theme examines how decentralization has affected the quality of education delivery, including teaching and learning processes, access to resources, and student outcomes, and highlights successful local strategies and initiatives.

### **Professional Capacity Building**

According to the participants, autonomy in Punjab increase the quality of education by permitting for more community participation, flexible class design, and context-specific teaching. Localized decision-making improve student engagement and outcomes. By encouraging instructors to sustain higher standards and match classroom procedures with community expectations, school management committees improve accountability through monitoring, which reinforces transparency and complete school performance. As one participant highlighted, *"Teaching quality has improved due to increased accountability and teacher monitoring. Student engagement and performance have also improved in many cases"* (P11).

Participants also highlighted the importance of professional capacity building to enhance education quality. Most schools lack teachers who specialize in core subjects like math, physics, biology, and chemistry. Participants recommended that, as in higher education, the government should focus on hiring qualified, specialized staff at the school level to improve teaching quality and student performance. As one participant noted, *"The government should provide subject-specific teachers, similar to the university model, where*

*instructors specialize in particular subjects” (P2). Without this expertise, localized governance cannot achieve the desired educational outcomes.*

### **Localized Curriculum Development**

Principals in Punjab have a strong emphasis on curriculum adaptation to regional languages under the decentralization context. While sustaining cultural identity, teaching in mother tongues increase engagement, confidence, and learning consequences. Incorporating regional languages and contextual necessities into classroom education is made easier by decentralization. *“The main change is to improve the curricula according to the demand of the area. It allows schools to integrate local languages and traditions into lessons” (P9).*

Respondents highlighted workshops, monitoring, and continuous teacher training as ways to increase educational values. To improve community involvement and decentralization outcomes, they have a strong emphasis on principals' and teachers' constant professional development. *“Training is required for them to work with communities to improve the education system; for teachers and administrators, professional development is needed” (P12).* There is a constant need for structural development initiatives that align with the decentralized model.

In Punjab, decentralized education improves learning through community engagement, accountability, and local decision-making. However, growth is hindered by a lack of subject matter specialists and insufficient training. Better learning results relies on regional language instruction, family involvement, local curriculum customization, and continuing teacher development.

### **Access to Distribution of Resources**

This theme examines how decentralization has impacted access to resources and identifies successful local-level strategies and initiatives.

### **Resource Constraints**

Many participants argued that decentralization has enhanced access to resources by allowing local authorities to respond more quickly to local and educational needs. As one participant stated,

Decentralization has somewhat improved access to resources like textbooks, infrastructure, and basic facilities in schools by enabling local authorities and school councils to address urgent needs more directly and efficiently (P6).

Although improvements are evident, some challenges remain. As one participant noted, *“One of the main challenges that we faced in school is a lack of adequate funding that causes trouble to the successful implementation of the decentralized educational reforms.”* Furthermore, access to modern technology, such as the internet and digital tools, continues to be limited, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. *“Access to textbooks and basic supplies has improved. However, access to advanced technology like the internet and computing is still limited in some rural schools” (P11).*

Digital learning is inadequate in Punjab's schools due to an absence of labs, computers, and internet connectivity. Due to inadequacy in the distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, rural students are at a difficulty when likened to their urban students who have access to better facilities.

## **Community-Based Resource Management**

Decentralization in the education system increases the community's role. The community is now more involved in addressing issues related to learning resources and school infrastructure, thanks to the increased authority granted to School Management Committees (SMCs). This collaborative method enables community members, parents, and local authorities to work together effectively to utilize resources in their areas. As one participant quoted, *"The local community, through the School Management Committee (SMC), and parents, through Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTMs), now have a greater voice in policymaking and budget allocations"* (P4). Another participant added, *"The collaboration with the community helps us to improve our school infrastructure. We ask School councils to renovate and build classrooms, improve water facilities."* This involvement led to better infrastructure, a more encouraging learning environment, and improved school operations.

According to respondents, community involvement enhance awareness, responsibility, and resource efficacy. Decentralized school governance and resource management systems are more operative overall when parents and community members contribute in decision-making because they take responsibility of school development goals and enhance support for students' needs.

## **Roles and Responsibilities of Educational Stakeholders**

This theme explores how the roles and responsibilities of local actors have changed, their perceived challenges and opportunities, and the overall impacts of decentralization on local governance and successful local-level strategies.

### **Role of Principal**

A decentralized system changes the role of school principals. Before decentralization, principals operated under centralized authority with limited involvement in decision-making. Now, principals are assigned administrative, managerial, financial, community involvement, and academic responsibilities. As one participant stated,

They are now able to handle every matter independently, which includes meetings, timely distribution of resources, and engaging with all stakeholders. We supervise all administrative work, coordinate with personnel, and work to implement school policies and achieve educational goals (P5).

The tasks of principals now extend beyond daily management to include leadership purposes, such as curriculum development, enhancing professional growth, and improving the learning environment. The accountability process for principals has also increased. They are now accountable to the SMCs, local government, parents, and the local community. As one principal stated that *"Principals are more burdened and accountable in front of parents and the local government as well"* (P9). To increase public trust in public schools, principals are expected to act as public representatives of the school by leading initiatives such as increasing enrollment.

### **Collaborative Authority**

Under the decentralized system, school principals observe that the establishment and active participation of the SMCs have increased engagement in schools. SMCs serve as a link between school management and the community, ensuring decisions reflect local needs. This change has brought both empowerment and challenges. Schools are no longer managing everything alone; they include local leaders, community members, and parents who share ideas and experiences for budget planning, resource use, and development plans. While this offers benefits, it sometimes leads to conflicts due to differing opinions.

## **Discussion**

Schools, when given autonomy and power, can bring innovations, such as networking with private funders and diversifying funding sources, forming more partnerships to bring advancements and technologies into schools, and contextualizing solutions with local needs and requirements (Kadikilo et al., 2025). Decentralization of agents is important through creating defined boundaries for targeted performances. Autonomy at a certain level initiates innovative learning, but autonomy without accountability can again create inequalities even at the local level, such as deterioration in the quality of education and resources confined in the hands of local authorities. Even with local autonomy, continuous monitoring and evaluation must be ensured as corruption is not confined to only national level authorities; it can emerge even at the tiniest level possible (Khilji et al., 2022). The principal-agent theory posits that when there is no proper check and balance, then a disconnect between the provincial bodies and the local agent generates inefficiencies (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In Punjab, accountability inadequacies in education governance are seen in bureaucratic inefficiency, insufficient training, and delayed policy execution. Poor administrative capacity reduces performance while revenue decentralization improves service delivery. Even though the Punjab Local Government Act of 2019 enhanced involvement through School Management Committees, democratic accountability and participatory governance in local educational decision-making procedures are still hindered by elite capture and insufficient administrative structures (Nisa & Ghafoor, 2024). The recently developed strategies in Punjab show that the government focuses on strengthening the community involvement in school governance through the SMCs.

The autonomy over revenue and spending is granted by the fiscal decentralization that reduce the dependency on the central transfer and modifies the resource constraints (Fedelino, 2010). When local governments utilize property taxes to make income, they become less dependent on federal funding. The fiscal decentralization of 18th Amendment in Pakistan is hindered by complex financial administration, poor taxation, and political interfering (Consortium for Development Policy Research, 2023). Furthermore, Pakistani local administrations often lack financial management expertise, which leads to poor resource utilization and financial mismanagement. Aligned incentives, transparent audit procedures, and capacity-building programs are needed to tackle this. Reduced political partiality and suitable public investment are basics for effective fiscal decentralization (Waston and Khan 2005). In a highly centralized political landscape of Pakistan, political interference can also be a reason behind unequal distribution of funds at local level, patronizing districts that are loyal to them and leaving the rest underfunded (Rashid & Rashid, 2024). In rural areas, the implementation of decentralized education policy remains ineffective and uneven; the public schools suffer from poor infrastructure, congested classrooms, and no internet connectivity (Waqar et al., 2024). Although decentralization policies motivate the school to function independently, the dependency on resources and bureaucratic structure affects the autonomy of the school administrator. (Fakir & Arain, 2023). Local educational requirements are given importance in decentralized decision-making process of Pakistan, though successful execution is hindered by inadequate funding and corruption. To strengthen civil involvement among institutional and community cohorts in education governance, efficient decentralization should increase community encouragement, possession, and participation (Malta, 2023).

Establishment of school council and participatory evaluation of school management encourage students that foster critical and strategic thinking and create a pressure of accountability on the school administration (Zaheer, 2022). Though just symbolic representation of students can be taken by the school administration but practically there is need for the clear roles and proper training for the student representatives.

The material and financial distribution of resources is a critical issue according to the principals. There is a moderate improvement in the distribution of textbooks and infrastructure development, but shortage of resources persists in rural areas (Dr. S. Raza et al., 2024). Local educational requirements are given priority in Pakistan's decentralized decision-making process, but implementation is hindered by improper funding and corruption. In order to increase civil engagement in education governance and reinforce accountability, effective decentralization requires community empowerment, ownership, and participation (cf. Muhammad Khan & S. Mirza, 2011). The rural school is becoming more dependent on the informal community donors. This situation creates a systematic weakness where resource constraint affects the schools' ability to maintain long-term planning and quality imposition (see Fu & Mohamed Hashim, 2024). The lack of organizational assurances generates disparity of power where schools mostly depend on external resources due to unequal distribution of resources and weak administrative structure (Hillman et al., 2009). Without the consistent support of finances from the authority, result is a superficial transfer of power.

Decentralization reforms are not implemented uniformly despite efforts to achieve the policy goals. The continuous delays, poor communication, and conflict between the different authorities at the local level cause hurdles in policy implementation. In the public sector of Pakistan, it seemed that fund release and poor coordination are the main issues (Malik & Rana, 2019). Effective decentralization of education in Pakistan is hindered by administrative, institutional, and support lacks. Decentralization often fails in circumstances with insufficient governance, according to Habib & Rafique (2019). Principal's claim delayed decision-making, vague directions, and little support from higher authorities, all of which point to a gap between policy and practice. The government should plan policies strategically, initiate programs for better coordination, and improve the fund distribution system. Without these the stakeholders will feel burdened and isolated, and frustrated (Ahmad et al., 2014)

One of the main benefits of the decentralized system highlighted here is that it increases accountability and transparency. Through the PTMs and SMCs, local people were included in the school affairs, which increased the accountability and the transparency (Baacha et al., 2020). Students use social media and provide false information about the school staff, which causes trouble for them (Acharya, 2024), thus posing a risk of conflict when the accountability method is misused and not properly understood by the participants.

Decentralized education improves results, infrastructure, and commitment by cumulative community, parent, and SMC involvement; yet, its effectiveness relies on citizen participation (Ilahi & Khalid, 2022). Improved community participation in decentralized education in Pakistan increases expectations for schools, but administrative pressure outcomes from a lack of planning, supervision, and support. OECD (2024) maintains a balance between capacity building and autonomy. There is a gap between expectations and organizational capability in efficiently providing improved educational outcomes, according to respondents, who also note that while participation is helpful, school administrations are incapable of fulfilling increasing demands due to a lack of resources, tools, and training (Asim et al., 2025). In Pakistan, local elite financing is utilized by School Management Committees to support schools; yet, weak decentralization continues as a result of both administrative authority and limited capacity-building (OECD, 2024). Effective decentralization needs proper training for local players, according to the Pakistani study. In the absence of accountability, responsibilities turn into burdens, leading to discontent, misunderstandings, and arguments between stakeholders and school management.

According to Principal-Agent Theory, governance is encouraging by clear orders and responsibility. The study argues that collaborative decentralized governance can improve

accountability, enhance educational performance, and improve resource distribution in light of weak bureaucracy, resource inadequacy, and elite involvement.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, educational decentralization has increased the authority of principals and local communities, resulting in improved decision-making, curriculum development, and access to resources. However, persistent disparities in resource allocation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited funding, and evolving stakeholder roles continue to impede the effectiveness of decentralization. Enhanced monitoring and increased community participation through School Management Committees represent positive developments. While greater autonomy is beneficial, conflicting power structures and inadequate professional development remain significant challenges. The findings indicate that achieving the full benefits of decentralization requires strengthening local capacities, implementing transparent accountability mechanisms, and ensuring equitable resource distribution. In the absence of these measures, decentralization may remain a superficial reform rather than a substantive improvement in educational outcomes.

### **Recommendations**

Strategic changes must be made to improve equity and governance in the decentralized educational system of Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. For decentralized policy execution, the government should establish support units to provide technical help, training, and supervision. To increase local capacity, compulsory training in planning, budgeting, management, and governance is essential for school principals and members of the School Management Committee. Innovation should be promoted by transparent audits that offer access to local education development duties. To monitor financing and instructor attendance, a dashboard system is required. While updated financial autonomy and teacher rotation programs can reduce gaps and improve results, Community Education Agreements can simplify roles.

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