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RESEARCH PAPER

Decentralization in Education System: Outcomes and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

School cluster policy implementation is an effort to develop actualized school demands in the form of decentralization of institutional authority. This article focused on recent developments in the decentralization of school-based management in enhancing administration, Academic and financial management for the development of the school system, and quality education through community participation in decision-making, proper budgetary utilization and transparency, and proper school monitoring and evaluation. The central focus of the approach is to empower school leadership. A qualitative approach using a case study strategy was employed. Fifteen school Cluster Head Teachers from the highly resourced school cluster who had attended induction training were appointed as research participants using the purposive sampling technique. The primary data were collected from semi-structured interviews. Using an explorative case study design resulted in a rich and deep description of Head teachers' experiences. The major argument presents a model of school cluster policy in the form of decentralization of school-based management is very much relative. Still, there is a gap between policy and practice across contexts. Instead of debating the model of decentralization of school-based management, managerial practices in the form of delegation of power as an authority have to be practiced in the context around to fulfill the real needs of the school in the particular context of Sindh Pakistan. However, effective implementation of the School cluster policy must require time management, expertise, and assistance from the parental department in providing proper induction training in the local context as an initiative of delegation of power.

| **KEYWORDS** | Decentralization, Head Teacher, School Cluster Policy, School-Based-Management |

Introduction

Decentralization refers to the transfer of responsibility and power to local communities and schools. In contrast to a centralized approach that is primarily controlled by a central body, they can then make their own decisions about many aspects of policy and practice. Theoretically, this approach improves learner performance, increases parental satisfaction, and strengthens accountability through community involvement and support (Androniceanu &Ristea, 2014).

Against this backdrop, the Sindh Pakistan School Cluster Policy implementation was introduced and implemented. This introduced model is based on the group of schools from bottom feeder school that depends on an established strengthened school called cell hub school and this number of schools make school cluster represents these all schools depend on the management of school cluster administration. The approach's central goal is to strengthen school leadership. To ensure the smooth implementation of this policy, new head teachers were also recruited on merit and went through an intensive orientation program. The findings indicate a lack of smooth implementation and systematic evaluations of decentralized systems, specifically the school cluster policy implementation. In reality, the head teachers continue to experience the top-down approach.

Since independence, Pakistan has been facing some issues in the areas of education and attempts have been made to relate the education system to the needs, despite these

issues many efforts and investments there to improve the teaching and learning process to provide compulsory education at the school level. Taking responsibility state took some initiatives to provide basic education in remote and scattered schools. Demographically Scattered schools in remote areas need a mechanism to connect them with well-resourced schools for transition purposes to continue compulsory education. The notified school clusters are centrally located and accessible to the other school members by grouping them in one cluster managed by a well-resourced School Cluster Hub (School Education, 2017). School Cluster Policy is favoured among policymakers in various education systems which provides a framework for schools to work together with limited resources to raise the quality (Ali, 2006). But is necessary to assign such people who are willing to work have envisioned in the policy (Mislevy, 2018).

This intention encourages acquiring Knowledge of the outcome and challenges of implementing this policy. Therefore, examining this process helped to identify best practices as recommendations needed to overcome the difficulties of the policy.

Literature Review

School Cluster Policy as a model of Delegation of power

Providing basic education is one of the responsibilities of the state. No doubt it is difficult to make changes in the system unless all concerned partners are not on the same page. The change process not only works slowly but it needed willingness and active participation. Policies work but it is necessary how people get them to work more (Mphahlele & Rampa, 2014). This is under discussion and notified policy of school clusters is envisioned to support one step closer to the schools to facilitate each other. But the such system needs to be presented and explained well to build consciousness and a clear understanding of its intended purpose (Shikalepo, 2018). In this scenario, Mphahlele and Rampa (2014), have also a consideration and advised to be good communication setup among all schools enabling them to share required information smoothly and easily. In this way, Head Teacher who receives little or no professional support and has no proper understanding and capacity face problems and resultantly there is school improvement. In this sense, Fullan (2009) also argued and suggested that school leaders must establish a professional learning community with their group members and should constantly be in search of ways can improve professional skills.

Expected outcomes of the School Cluster Policy

Sindh Education Department introduced the School cluster policy intended to close together remote schools as a team to look after well (*School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021*, 2021). In this concept of school management to develop its performance Maphosa (2013), also mentioned the concept of school clustering as the team providing a forum for teachers to meet, share and even try out ideas to improve teaching and learning that is linked with empowering school leader with required resources dealing with education-related issues together (Edwards, 2016). So, school clusters' head teachers are expected to work together but it needed mutual understanding and cooperation among all aligned factors as Gray, Hodgson, and Heaney (2011), postulated that the benefits of a school cluster system include improving the quality of teaching and learning through breaking solo engagements. So, a school management system as a team has essentialities to nurture and strengthen the spirit of cooperation (Shikalepo, 2018). Moreover, Topnaar (2004); Aipinge (2007) and Nghatanga (2011) concurred in their findings that the school clusters framework helped to encourage team working at the school level that also supports school management by bringing all concerned stakeholders into various collaborative groups for successful outcomes of the policy. More importantly, the compulsory and sufficient component of CPD needs top priority where academicians need to participate to upgrade teaching performance. Contrarily, (Steyn, 2019) stressed, teamwork can improve the quality of

schools by utilizing necessary resources more effectively. Whereas, (Chapman et al., 2012), revealed that well-resourced schools experience less stress and difficulties and in particular, benefit more when resources are combined and shared.

Policy Mechanisms and Implementation Challenges

The school head teacher works to perform his job responsibilities as per the intended outcomes. So, implementing a school cluster policy has some ingredients of success in building coordination among stakeholders through awareness and such a mechanism may work better when all the responsibilities are delegated down with required power and authority. So, By partitioning schools into manageable groups, clusters need to provide an administrative framework. If the core target of the policy is to develop small schools with bigger ideas then it must reduce discrimination in rural and urban schools. So, identified problems at the ground level must be discussed (Ali, 2006). School administrative issues vary contextually, Sindh, Pakistan's school system is more influenced by political factors resulting in low performance, as the school head teacher has been called responsible for all managing areas which made his job more complex that requires departmental support and positive community contribution (Dowling, 2009). So, such macro and micro problems prevented the cluster from achieving its capacity-building goals. As, the leader of the school resists changing environments under the utilization of necessary resources (Chikoko, 2009). To take up these responsibilities local-level management and the community need to play a good role with the support of governing bodies (Ranson, 2011). Although, Policy implementation will either succeed or fail depending on the attitudes of implementers and the user community (Kadodo & Zanga,2015). But to overcome these issues, school head teachers' democratic leadership style has also an influential role in positive outcomes (Ndaipa, 2016). In this wavelength, multiple strategies and interventions can increase mandatory implementation (Nathan et al., 2022).

So, overcoming implementing challenges requires an effective mechanism of the policy, which is necessary to support the head teacher empowering them through authority to look after all school activities. As Shikalepo (2018), indicated, the proper legal framework would have ensured benefits were accrued to those involved in cluster activities so that they are motivated to keep the system operational.

Material and Methods

The current study applied a qualitative research methodology and used semi-structured interview protocols to collect data. This small-scale qualitative and interpretive case study was based on fifteen school Head teachers who were purposively and conveniently selected as these school leaders were in access and offered their services as research participants. As the objective of the designed study was to facilitate the understanding of school clustering policy and its implementing challenges, as a social actor it has advantageous to know through the words of the policy practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). More importantly, this sample size was determined using the "saturation point" approach (Kumar, 2018). So author reviewed the collected data to identify whether later collection efforts yielded any data that was significantly different from the data collected in the early collection attempts. After that stored data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis with technical support using the Nvivo software 16 version. For privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used (from SCHT 1 up to SCHT 15, P stands for school Cluster Head Teacher as Participant) to protect the identity of the participant, and they were informed of their right to participate voluntarily to withdraw at any stage if they wish. This Interpretivism was used not to predict school head Teachers' experience but to understand and describe how they perceive this new mechanism of school cluster with aligned challenges if they (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using a more explorative case study design resulted in a rich and deep description of Head teachers' experiences, which resulted in an understanding of the policy to find successful measures (Yin, 2017). Thereafter the

codes were deductively mapped onto the set categories to form themes. After using these processes as a guide, categories were focused and sharpened to form two themes, as indicated in the findings section below.

Results and Discussion

Head Teacher's Perspective of the school Cluster Policy

The current study mainly focused on the newly initiated idea of school cluster policy in the context of Sindh Pakistan. Generally, most participants revealed a low understanding of what the school clustering system is all about and indicated several reasons are linked to the framed system. However, these factors can be reaped only "if the system is practiced accordingly, the current observation presented no convincing evidence that school Cluster Policy understood and alive well (SCHT-3). So if the system supports more understanding and could be implemented effectively, teaching and administration could have helped better planning and organizing other professional activities as well. Such a system could also provide services to facilitate school staff if powers are delegated as per the vision of the policy. As SCHT-1 and 4 revealed that " school head has not been called at any platform where he can raise his voice but just got instructional information. That's why there are drastic and dramatic results and have more communication gap between upper and lower concerned stakeholders". In this way, school head teachers face less understanding due to the unpacking role having a gulf line between the higher hierarchy and top management (SCHT-6).

As another SCHT-9 Sharing his understanding expressed that "no one document of the policy was shared as content which provides detailed information." In such a way above quoted lines indicate there is low policy implementation due to less understanding. That's the way the situation created stress and anxiety since high expectations were set with less power and autonomy. So, it is important to recognize the role of the school head to involve him in decision-making and in framing the mechanism as a reasonable workload, a comfortable work environment, and autonomy to bring reform in education is necessary for the success of the policy implementation (Pont, Moorman, & Nusche, 2008).

Head Teachers' School Practices

Sindh Education Department expected many responsibilities from selected school head teachers which were notified of school clusters. As the current policy is envisioned with many hopes as per its themes including community engagement. So, the head teacher assigned the task to deal with aligned management issues. Findings revealed that participants shared some major factors that influenced policy implementation like the communication gap and no updated financial mechanism and allocation as per school to fulfil the needs of required resources. Although, policy framed on cost-effective themes if schools have not been provided funds, school leaders face many issues to initiate ideas are linked with financial support. As most of the participants reflected that "*Policy document discussed, head teachers are responsible to do routine based activities but practised as we were not providing such funds.*" In such a situation where schools' decided to make some activities part of the formal calendar but are unable to do due to non-availability of the financial resources. If schools have not resourced with required facilities then how a school can be updated into the given concept? Such reflections show that is no difference between school clusters and non-cluster schools in terms of financial budgets because these school clusters were not provided with specific budgets. Being a leader of the school I always visited the office to fulfil the shortage of funds but I got no response, so I went to a community where I found few people supported me to facilitate my school." whereas school policy asked to engage the community for better coordination but in our context head of the school found much involvement, especially in the form of political and teachers unionism, disrupt the system more." (SCHT-5,9,12). Based on the responses of the participants Head teachers less

practised the policy due to enormous responsibilities and lower delegation of power. Such responsibilities are delimited so they must have an explicit mandate to focus on those domains. (Pont et al., 2008). Based on school cluster practices there is much influence of the contextual factors like politics and teachers' unions that made head teachers' jobs more complex and have not expected outcomes. The interested and well-educated school head teachers' perspectives concerning the policy have shed some light on the management issues and challenges. Because this concept fundamentally requires site-based management and much autonomy to make decisions (World Bank, 2007). Unfortunately, due to contextual challenges, the concept of policy did not follow the freedom of choice for the head teacher as originally promised. As one of the heads, teachers perceive more freedom and authority to work as per his vision but do have not got any decision-making power. Proper reorientation of the school people and the autonomy of the resources provided by the Ministry of Education must be systemic to make the 'cluster school' policy a successful framework of school management (Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin 2011, p. 1492).

Conclusion

Whereas demands of school demonstration continually have changed and many new trends and approaches have been applied to develop School clusters empirically to avoid all kinds of obstacle factors. In this context where school leaders have less understanding and bigger challenges made the system low practised. So, Before intervening or designing such managerial policies the contextual realities and needs of schools have to be identified and diagnosed.

Recommendations

It is recommended from the current study that head teacher of the school clusters should be offered policy orientation sessions. It is recommended to translate the policy into local languages. For the purpose of the policy implementation successfully, head teachers need to be empowered in decision making. The process of the decentralization of the School administration must be practiced. Further, studies may be conducted to explore the challenges of the school cluster policy implementation in Sindh Pakistan.

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