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**CHALLENGES OF CURRICULUM DECENTRALIZATION IN
PAKISTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum decentralization in Pakistan's education system emerged as a significant reform following the 18th Amendment in 2010, which transferred curriculum development responsibilities from the federal to provincial governments. While decentralization aims to accommodate regional diversity and improve educational responsiveness, it faces numerous challenges, including governance inefficiencies, lack of standardized implementation, and disparities in educational resources among provinces. Political instability and varying provincial capacities further complicate the process, leading to inconsistent curriculum frameworks and disparities in quality education. Additionally, inadequate teacher training and institutional support hinder effective curriculum implementation at the local level. The study highlights that while decentralization has the potential to promote inclusivity and contextualized learning, it also risks exacerbating educational inequalities due to varying provincial approaches. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that ensures provincial autonomy while maintaining national educational standards. Effective policy frameworks, capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative governance structures are crucial to enhancing curriculum decentralization's effectiveness in Pakistan.

Keywords: Curriculum Decentralization, Pakistan Education System, 18th Amendment, Governance Challenges, Educational Policy, Provincial Autonomy, Teacher Training, Curriculum Standardization, Political Influence, Educational Inequality.

Introduction

Decentralization offers a systemic response to acknowledge local needs and the diverse structure of education across different parts of the world. Pakistan is arranged into four provinces Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Each province has its own language and diverse ethnic makeup (Siddiqi, 2024). It is obvious that the centralization of curriculum is not satisfactory to the diverse education systems across the provinces. In this regard, after the 18th amendment, significant changes have been brought about in the list of federal and provincial subjects, in which curriculum and syllabus have been shifted from federal to the provinces. The 18th Amendment in 2010 abolished the Concurrent List and transferred subjects to the provinces which were mentioned in the Federal Legislative List Part B. One of the transferred subjects was "Curriculum, syllabus, planning, and policy, centers of excellence and standards of education." Different provinces of Pakistan have distinct cultures, histories, administrative and governance arrangements, and social and political systems. All of these differences influence the perception of decentralization and how it will be practiced.

It is believed that understanding the stakeholders of curriculum systems is critical to realize how curriculum decentralization is practiced and impacted. Curriculum policy involves both in-context bureaucracy and out-of-context bureaucracy groups. Curriculum developers consider how these groups are involved in curriculum policy processes (Khilji et al.2022). Theoretical and methodological considerations of these groups are crucial in exploring the effects of curriculum policies with these groups. It is assumed that, through examining how decentralization policy is perceived by stakeholders, and how they are involved or how they react to this policy will contribute to understanding the challenges of curriculum decentralization. The process of curriculum policy should look into how it is made, applied, and the effects of this policy. Curriculum policy process frequently aims to address specific issues or concerns and set out the guidelines that will direct action. This section relies on the relational view of policy enactment that the meaning of policy actualizes in use, in practice. This view of policy research suggests that to explore the meaning of policy, inquiries should go beyond policy documents and conduct analysis in practice. The enactment of policy also constructs, alters, or perpetuates existing power relations. How policy gets enacted represents how it reshapes these power

relations. Judging the effects is frequently an investigation of the consequences of policy on different positions' contexts or subsequent actions and on the users of policy.

Background of Curriculum Decentralization

Curriculum decentralization as significant education reform emerged on the world stage in 1960. Apparently it was a state strategy of capitalist countries to pose one nation's education system as a "gold standard" to dominate and foster their political and social ideology throughout society. Nonetheless, from a different standpoint Rowen Sharpiro declared school institutions to be inefficient, bureaucratic organizations and labeled their inability to modernize as a hindrance to the nation's development. Thereafter, several international agencies began pushing developing countries to decentralize education systems. Apparently, the rationale was to modernize education systems through the localization of the content of education. Inefficiency, rigidity, and poor quality education were cited as prime reasons for this strategy. The same rationale was extended to developed countries launches an initiative and gets good results. This flood of publications and other strategies launched by many global, regional, and national agencies in the early 1990s began a strong effect on South Asian countries (Gul & Khilji, 2021). Consequently, they compelled central government educational authorities in developing countries to adopt policies that would adjust educational systems according to regional demands, thus creating a so-called "global shift". It has been over two decades since this movement swept the world. In trying to make sense of events, it is useful to begin with an examination of various strands of thought, each of which has influenced these policies in some form. Broadly speaking, the decentralized nature of certain regions and states is one of the factors demanding regional education.

Pakistan, a country that once hogged the limelight on global political issues, now is mired in domestic problems. It was just another case of newly independent counties facing the formidable task of nation building. United federal provinces were transformed into a republic of the United States of America. However, the chronic underlying realities undermined various policy formulations. The creation of the East Wing and geographically so unequal, they posed unique development problems (Sain, 2023). This galvanized federal but limited the effectiveness of social and economic policies. Furthermore, unlike the dominion days, Pakistan found itself trapped between two competing power blocs

as the cold war shrouded world politics. In such a scenario, Central government policy often failed to address regional needs in order to create a “one-size-fit-all” national education system. Time is of essence, events have passed and in order to progress at the current juncture, there is a pressing need for a flexible and responsive educational framework that can address regional needs as required. A more nuanced approach is therefore crucial to enhance understanding on how to proceed effectively from historical experiences

Concept of Curriculum Decentralization

How does one define curriculum decentralization? An analysis of this concept is needed before discussing how to address the challenges of implementing curriculum decentralization in the educational system of Pakistan. Decentralization, fundamentally, exists to mean the “transfer of authority and responsibility from central or higher levels of government to lower levels of government or non-governmental institutions” (SOMANTRI, 2018), which could be regional, sub-regional, or local authorities. Nonetheless, the concept of decentralization is much more complex and involves various aspects and dimensions.

A more detailed concept of decentralization is proposed here that differentiates between five different dimensions or levels of decentralization: political, administrative, fiscal, learning area, and individual learning decentralization. These definitions are developed to establish “a clearer framework for the analysis of issues, similarities, and differences amongst the different dimensions of decentralization”. It is suggested that discourse concerning decentralization is often confused because the term is used without being sufficiently explicit about which particular form of decentralization is being referred to.

Although decentralization “can mean many different things to different people... it is not a one dimensional model, but rather a mix of many dimensions”, and it is crucial to consider its various aspects in connection with attempts to decentralize or restructure conventional educational curriculum systems. The fundamental principles underlying curriculum decentralization and their implications for the flexibility, diversity, and responsiveness of education to local needs, conditions, and cultures are then considered (Matete, 2022). There are many misunderstandings or myths concerning decentralization related to its benefits, specifically its impact on efficiency, equity, and quality of education. In reality, there is a lack of clear evidence

demonstrating that decentralized systems perform better. There is a growing body of data that suggests decentralization, in tracking all policy areas, leads to perverse outcomes.

Historical Context of Education in Pakistan

Pakistan's educational development has undergone radical changes since the inception of Pakistan in 1947. Several policies, commissions, programmers, action plans, and projects have been introduced by the government, all of which have shaped the current educational practices. Since the 1990s, these developments have included initiatives that have transformed the overall education system. (Hussain et al.2022) The Education Sector Reforms (ESR), for example, have introduced several new strategies and interventions such as decentralization, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and school-based management (SBM).

In light of these seminal events, it is apposite to trace the major policy measures taken in the education sector in the country over the years which unexpectedly received a sudden jolt after the Kargil war in 1999. Policy instruments of the government of the day, Education Policy 1972–1980, the new system of education introduced in 1979, Zia regime's attempts at Islamization from 1979–1988, the FOI–Benezir regime between 1988–1999, the coup of 1999 and ensuing NCNE 2000 both brought visible, invisible, direct and indirect changes in education policy formulation and implementation (Janjua, 2022). The same events predetermined contemporary educational challenges. These changes/developments/policy frameworks are viewed critically and in the same sequence the changes that came about in Pakistan which conceived curricular decentralization are accounted for. A symposium on the same theme was organized by the University of Education on June 17–18, 2014, which was attended by eminent educators of the country. At the end of this write-up, a few suggestions are offered which can be borne in mind while taking things further after curricular decentralization in these present times being mulled over. It seems, therefore, these both events would be interconnected whilst considering education policy strategies, formulation, execution, success if any, instant success, visible changes, and few failures that have happened.

Evolution of Education Policies

Decentralization has become a central theme in education policy worldwide. It has transformed education into a joint responsibility between provinces and the central government, offering significant autonomy that impacts curriculum practices. However, the

implications of this autonomy for curriculum accountability remain underexplored. Pakistan's education system continues to struggle, necessitating a national standard curriculum and expanded educational opportunities (Sain, 2023). The government's responsibility in upholding the national curriculum is vital, especially decades after independence. This analysis examines policy papers and literature to trace the evolution of education policy in Pakistan, which often fails to meet cultural educational needs while catering to government priorities. Since 1947, colonial influences have shaped policy changes, with early strategies grounded in British colonial methods. Efforts over the years to enhance the system were largely focused on centralized oversight through various reports. Recent decentralization has significantly empowered provinces in curriculum implementation. While the 1990s saw attempts to innovate the national curriculum, current trends have removed English authorities from control. This transition has highlighted planning shortcomings from the inception of the national curriculum, leading to inadequate alignment with societal needs and inconsistent policy reactions. Since 2000, the gradual decentralization process has faced criticism from the EU and human rights advocates calling for more uniformity in the education system. (Gul & Khilji, 2021)

Current State of Curriculum Decentralization in Pakistan

Curriculum decentralization, placement and local school governance, is becoming a part of institutionalized education nation's discourse across the world. A number of developing countries including Pakistan have come back to the thought over the last decade, after put off considering the post-socialist wave of worldwide regimes in the 1980s. Sequential curriculum deregulation in Pakistan has laid foundation with the 18th amendment legal instrument pass in 2010. Especially, more than a half is related to the put off federal education responsibilities (Rafiq, 2022). Here, while curriculum law regarding the "national standard" for harmonization are going on to be develop and hand-over, thought-provoking questions on what type of educational regulation will be standard nationally and how it will be different across the more than 33 districts and their several thousand municipal secondary institutions across approximately 3 kingdom people is inherent.

The curriculum framework optionally dialogues about the sector and how prepared and trained teachers and the conceptual locally developed curriculum have quiet room. Such curriculum, often

perceived as a troublesome task by teacher's reflection demotion processes, may create paradoxical outcomes by further rationalizing negligence on the NCF recommendations. In this regard, the paper surveys the rationale of curriculum decentralizations and positional ties, reviewing how actual prepared curriculum align or diverse the NCF recommendations (Williams et al.2024). Systematical research results are very based on the variety of the most recent curriculum prepared hours that have been accompanied for educational deployments.

An intuitive (a)symmetry way, it essentially notes that most significantly of the academic curricula and formatively teacher designed curriculum are near sighted and its different manifestations and it can be developed and lead to fostering a free pedagogic space usage for local educators, as well as possible benefit education planning makers. Concerning the modern knowledge the gap instructional practices and dominant pedagogies between urban and more remote areas are partial feed (Iqbal and Ashraf2023). Nonetheless, this process is important to local contest complementary learning conditions are heterogeneous and, other than structure kid participant support educational setting, especially reveal variety of school related element and resource representation. This findings expand the discussion on centralised curriculum on excessive exploration by showing that it may bring to a less equitable school and formatively curriculum preparations. Redressing, under the light of this researched tentative suggestion are offered how enhance on-the-ground curriculum practices may be addressed, which can inform also the ongoing that sector curricular law on the better contextualized and enforced in public secondary schools.

Overview of Curriculum Frameworks

In 2006, the 'Emergent National Curriculum' for Grades I–V was created to offer a research-based framework addressing children's cognitive, socio-cultural, and physiological development, aligning with national educational goals. The 'National Curriculum for Languages (2006)' was also established for Punjabi, Seraiki, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi, aiming to enhance curriculum guidelines, improve academic standards, and bolster teachers' abilities to instruct in national languages across Pakistan's schools. The curriculum considered local cultural traditions, folklore, and knowledge, ensuring inclusivity for females. It acknowledged alignment with local educational needs, interests, and learning diversity, reflecting on the socio-economic variations among

students and communities. (Shah, 2023) A critical aspect was understanding how well these curricular frameworks addressed local interests and provided alignment with various educational contexts, particularly given the diversity in student populations. Exploring these issues became important following the 18th Constitutional Amendment Act, which devolved curriculum development to provincial levels. Post-2010, provinces created their own curriculum policies, alleviating central government control over educational frameworks. Although the federal ministry developed 'National Curriculum 2006' in 2011, the Curriculum Wing was abolished in 2013, solidifying the provinces' role in curricular development. Still, provinces could choose to adopt the federal curriculum. This analysis highlights how these frameworks have addressed local needs and abilities while striving for improved educational quality and monitoring across diverse local educational programs. (Baig et al., 2021)

Challenges of Implementing Curriculum Decentralization

Pakistan's education system struggles with quality and access for its young population. Governed by a complex structure across provinces and local governments, the system is further complicated by 25,000 local governments struggling with experience. Education Authorities (EAs) are responsible for schools but vary widely in capacity. Initiatives for curriculum decentralization aim to transfer control to local authorities, but consistent policy execution has been elusive, with each province following its own path (Khilji et al.2022). Discrepancies within provinces exist, as Ba-Learning and Teaching Materials (LTM) are separate, and many EAs lack established curricula. Training and support for local educators need improvement, as there's no standard preservice training for Head Teachers essential for academic standards. In-service training provided by Local Teachers is often ineffective, consisting mainly of low-level lectures. EAs neglect recommended arts and crafts training, highlighting the need for better support and training for EA staff, many of whom have remained in positions for almost 50 years without modern training, leaving them ill-prepared for the evolving educational landscape. Challenges are intensified by regional socio-economic disparities, leading to varied educational approaches across provinces driven by different motivations. Districts lacking resources face significant hurdles in implementing decentralized practices. Analyzing education systems is complex due to the intertwining economic, social, and ethical issues. This complexity can obscure the relationship between national policy

objectives and local challenges. This analysis addresses these challenges and their implications in the context of decentralized education management in Baluchistan. It provides insights regarding local context, culture, geography, and socio-economics, laying the foundation for understanding the education system and developing effective policy interventions for improved educational equity and quality. (R. Winkler, 1970)

Lack of Capacity Building

Inadequacy of Capacity Building: Devolving responsibilities in respect of curricular concerns in the 21st century have become global imperatives in the wake of recognizing diverse socio-cultural and economic contextual disparities. The devolvement of curricular concerns and its pedagogical translation at the local level is instrumentally projected for the vicarious and tactical trajectories of educational reform and development. However, these policy anticipations of curriculum decentralization at the local level have often been frustrated by facing serious constraints and challenges (Kuhlmann et al.2024). Foremost amongst these factors have been the lack of capacity building within the educational sector, articulated by comments heard from the variety of sources in the five districts that policy visions and mandates devolving new responsibilities for curriculum development are not matched by the capabilities and practices of those who are expected to play the most integral role in its enactment (i.e. local teachers and administrators).

Establishing an interactive school curriculum requires transforming centralized initiatives into practical learning programs in schools. However, this process is often inadequate in many districts. Policy mandates and curricular resources at the district level are frequently misinterpreted, poorly implemented, altered significantly, or discarded due to political changes. Discussions reveal a widespread lack of confidence among local educators in understanding and applying the curriculum effectively, leading to uncertain pedagogical practices without supportive systems. Experiences indicate a critical deficit in the conceptual clarity and pedagogical skills needed for educators to make effective decisions for enacting progressive curricula. This capability relies not only on well-structured disciplinary knowledge but also on familiarity with relevant pedagogical strategies, such as instructional tactics, content organization, pacing, classroom management, and assessment practices (Albritton-Terry, 2022). Teacher disposition plays a crucial role in shaping this capacity,

highlighting that simply disseminating standardized knowledge is insufficient for effective pedagogy. Instead, pedagogical knowledge must be contextually mediated, socially negotiated, and developed within the specific practice environment where it is employed, emphasizing the need for a dynamic approach to teaching.

Impact of Socio-Political Factors on Curriculum Decentralization

The purpose of the present research study is an attempt to understand the socio-political factors affecting the process of curriculum decentralization within Pakistan's educational landscape and to critically evaluate the viability of decentralized efforts in addressing the multiplicity of educational needs emerging within a diverse nation. Several socio-political factors are identified in the literature review which have a pronounced effect on the curriculum decentralization process within Pakistan. The focus is primarily upon the manner in which varying political agendas have shaped the structure of educational policy and practice at a local level in the provinces, leading to a breakdown of uniform and balanced national provision. Moreover, national and provincial educational priorities are also mandated or favored by societal values and shared contexts, which often remain at odds with the focus of policy efforts. (Butt et al.2024)

The study also investigates how political stability (or lack thereof) creates a foundation for the shifting nature of curriculum and pedagogical approaches in schools. An examination is conducted on the role of power dynamics among powerful stakeholders which subsequently shapes the climate of decentralized educational practice. Finally, the interconnection of socio-political factors with the emergent educational outcomes (as defined by the devising sectors to the decentralization process) is evaluated. The emphasis is placed upon how alignment between central and localized structures may ultimately demonstrate political expediency rather than providing a meaningful response to the varying needs of Pakistani schools. Overall, the studied compels deeper thought upon how schisms between political will, stakeholder cooperation and regional need may be ameliorated, demonstrating that a more comprehensive systems model must be used to underpin educational reform.

Influence of Political Agendas

The educational landscape in Pakistan has seen a series of disruptions due to different political agendas. With political parties often exploiting the education system for their own political

agendas, the quality and consistency of curriculum implementation are compromised. With this political exploitation, several stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and their parents, are left confused and anxious. (McCoy & Somer, 2021) This exploitation takes various forms such as changes in the educational structure, the content or the language of education policies and curricula. On some occasions, different curriculum projects and commissions draw a specific political perspective on the culture of how to represent identity leading to various representations of culture. While on the others, schools, colleges and universities are named after political personalities. Consequently, changes in the educational curricula and the culture of how to represent it are repeatedly transformed by different civil and military governments.

Yet, decentralization and deconcentrating were supposed to make the curriculum uniform but political exploitation speaks it otherwise. Therefore, there is a need to analyze whether the centralization of the curriculum on the eve of political instability is sustainable in a federation. The scope of curriculum should be broadened to develop a culture of which everyone feels a part. A regular reflective process on the political framework of education would be strengthened. Resistance on the part of educational institutions, teachers and students from political mobilization would be minimized if the internal assessment of curricula are shared with all other stakeholders. Or rather, the curriculum themes and contents would reflect more of a spectrum of political thoughts, be developed with the mutual concern and agreement of all the federating units. Only a stable and enduring political commitment would be supportive of such progress.

Teachers and Educators

Curriculum decentralization can happen on vertical (transferring the sole authority of curricular decisions to subnational levels) or on horizontal axis; the second has happened in Pakistan (Durrani & Halai, 2018). However, the main issue on policy and practice in PCDC 2006 should be focused on vertical dimension, keeping a check that how far policy formulated by federal government is adjusted to by other provinces. PCDC 2006 is working as a 'reductive' framework in terms of a set of guidelines in educational, policy, finance and curriculum matter. These guidelines provide the limit beyond which the provinces cannot cut; thus actually providing less autonomy to provinces in comparison to original NPE 1974 as well as CNC 1998. Despite the constraints in PCDC, provinces possess reasonable autonomy;

it would be interesting to see the shape of the policy somewhere between this poles, as well as a process and timescale.

Teachers' autonomy should have been increased as a result of PCDC 2006. The policy stipulates, "Teachers shall determine the syllabus when designing and planning the curriculum", as well as, "Stakeholders' ownership in the process of design/course over the curriculum", and, "Decentralized Process of curriculum development". The gap between policy statements and implementation is huge; no such actual provision is being observed (Sabil Farooq, 2017). As an evidence of this gap, issues such as, professional development opportunities for teachers relating to improved pedagogy and content management of curricular issues, are collective in nature and cannot be treated on an individual basis. Surgency is used very selectively; it appears to be a reductive mode of teacher empowerment. There is a clear trend (at an early stage of implementation) of sticking to the core principles of the national policy while ignoring perhaps more important teacher-related nuances. In the context of free curriculum provinces have a room of independent planning; there are tendencies/patterns towards concerted actions by provinces. Here the focus is rather minor issues pertaining to the 'small print' of PCDC, a policy that may predispose practices governed by the broader strokes of policy.

Conclusion

Decentralization has long been on the agenda of educational development in Pakistan. Yet there remains much to be done. In fact, the meaning of "decentralization" of educational planning and management is usually misunderstood in the country. The multifaceted aspects of decentralization are also notable. Educational decentralization often refers to the de-concentration of detailed planning by central authorities, delegation of some decision-making authority to field professional and/or broadly representative local committees, and the establishment of voluntary accountability ties between field units and central authority. While the policy approach to address these issues has expanded considerably since the early 1970s, significant change in the existing educational management systems has not been undertaken. What has been done has frequently been only in the nature of administering the existing student/teacher/population ratios (PTRs) through incremental budgetary approaches.

Most other countries are now increasing emphasis on decentralization of educational planning in recognition of the large

number of schools, children and teachers that must be managed within a single jurisdiction. Although experience from other developing countries is below-par, major emphasis is still on decentralization of financial authority to establish greater local control over decision-making affecting educational inputs. Political reluctance is yet to develop a sophisticated professional planning organization at a district (tehsil) level. All this has frequently led to the traditional failing model of de-concentration which has not only neglected to address the complex issue of transforming planning functions but has played only limited attention to the organization arrangements that are necessary to operationalize the power and responsibility of local panels. Political instability, the lack of consensus on the nature and extent of the educational crises and the policy option to manage it in a decentralized or centralized way, has further exacerbated past indecision.

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