

Devolution in Education: Perception, Experiences and Reflections of Elected District Nazims in Punjab

Ayaz Muhammad Khan, Munawar S. Mirza
Email: ayaz@ue.edu.pk

Devolution in education from provinces to district was a major shift in governance system in Pakistan. The devolved system of education revolved around the political leadership of the district, District Nazim who was an elected representative. This study explored the level of understanding of District Nazims' regarding their role in the devolved system, the policy of decentralization in education, the problems they had been facing and the strategies they adopted to address those problems. The study used a qualitative interpretative research design employing semi-structured interviews. The questions were developed on the roles and responsibilities of District Nazim as given in the decentralization document. The results of the study showed that the level of their understandings was pretty much associated with the academic qualifications. Moreover, they needed training in identifying and resolving the problems at their districts. They also need education and training to decentralize powers to lower levels of district management.

Keywords: decentralization, devolution in education, democratic leadership, educational problems

Introduction

Pakistan is a federation composed of four provinces, Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Gilgit Baltistan. Pakistan inherited administrative set up from the British in 1947. The administrative model that was introduced in Pakistan after its independence was primarily for the governance of the country and it made its way into most of the other organizations, including education (Cheema, Khwaja & Qadir, 2004). At the time of independence (1947) the local governments were vibrant and local councils used to deliver most of the public services during 1950s to 1960s (Shah, 2003). The First Five Year Plan (1955-60) mentioned for the first time the intent to decentralize planning regarding education especially school education to local governments.

The 1959 Report of the National Commission on Education also proposed the creation of separate sections with considerable autonomy within their sphere of responsibility. Basic Democracies, a short-lived local government system, was introduced during the Ayub regime in the 1960s (Sayyed,

1967). It was suggested in the Fourth Five Year Plan (1970-1975) that a close involvement of the local communities with the schools would be sought and District School authorities would work under provincial governments but contrary to that in 1972 all schools were nationalized.

The role of federal government was to formulate the national policy, address issues regarding access to education, equity and quality of education, setting teacher pay levels, defining required teachers qualifications, setting the norms for national curriculum and assessing students' performance through national assessment systems. At the federal level, there existed a Curriculum Wing in the Ministry of Education. (MoE, 2008)

The main responsibilities of provincial government included formulation of provincial education policy in the light of National Education Policy, coordination with the federal government for implementation of Education Sector Reform (ESR) program as well as with the respective districts, arranging pre service and in-service teacher training, assuring equity, access to schooling, and quality of

education and implementing curriculum in the provinces. Curriculum Bureau and Text Book Boards existed as separate institutions whose activities were coordinated by the Federal Curriculum Wing. The syllabi were common to all the provinces and to that extent the curriculum was centralized. However, the provinces were free to interpret the course curriculum in view of the conditions existing in that Province (Zaidi, 2005).

Before devolution of education from provincial government of the Punjab to its 35 districts, the Education Secretary used to be the senior most position in the secretariat of the provincial departments of education who was member of the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP). They usually were from District Management Group (DMG) and accounts group of the federal government. The educational administration was decentralized in 1973 in the province of Punjab when the province was divided into eight divisions comprising of four to six districts each (Shah, 2003).

Similarly, down the chain of command in the provinces, the Director Public Instruction (DPI) in the provinces, Directors of Education in the divisions and the District Education Officers, their staffs, e.g. DDEO, AEOs, Learning Coordinators (LCs) and teachers, were also under the control of federal civil servants.

In Punjab, before devolution the elementary and secondary education was headed by respective Director of Public Instruction (DPI) who was selected on the basis of seniority from among the education professionals. They were responsible to the Secretary of Education for all elementary and secondary education activity in Punjab. They were assisted by Additional Director of Public Instruction, three Directors and seven Assistant Directors each (Kazmi, 2005).

The provincial governments promulgated the Local Government Ordinance, 2001 in their respective provinces to install a new integrated Local Government System with effect from 14 August 2001 to function within the provincial framework and adhere to the federal and provincial laws. The new system allowed public participation in decision-making. The essence of this system was that the local governments would be accountable to

citizens for all their decisions and actions.

Since the appearance of Devolution plan in 2000 and till its promulgation in the provinces on 14 August 2001, a series of consultation and technical group meetings were held at federal as well as provincial levels to develop a well-designed education structure at provincial and district levels. Many posts were abolished and new posts were carved out with clear job descriptions (MSU, 2001 c). The education department of pre-devolution era was devolved through Punjab Local Government Ordinance 2001 in the Schedule I part A of decentralized offices.

Presently, the organizational setup of education in Pakistan has three levels.

1. Federal level (Ministry of Education, Trainings and Standards in Higher Education Govt. of Pakistan)
2. Provincial level (Department of Education, Govt. of Punjab)
3. District level (District level under Department of Education, Govt. of Punjab)

No federal level power from the Ministry of Education was devolved to lower level through Devolution Plan 2000. Devolution of Power Plan (2000) transferred responsibility for delivering education to local governments. The districts became responsible for planning, monitoring and evaluation of education systems at district level. Salary and managing teaching and non-teaching staff fell in the jurisdiction of district.

The objectives of changing the system of governance as mentioned by the National Reconstruction Bureau (2001 a) were “to restructure the bureaucratic setup and decentralize the administrative and financial authority to the district level and below and refocus administrative systems to allow public participation in decision-making with improved monitoring system at local councils level.”

According to the Devolution Plan (2000), “the local government is based on five fundamental principles; devolution of political power, decentralization of administrative authority, de-concentration of management system, diffusion of power authority nexus, and the distribution of the

resources to the district level” p. 2. The Devolution Plan (2000) devolved powers and responsibilities, including those related to social services, from the provincial levels to elected district level authorities and local councils. Under devolution, political power, decision-making authority, and administrative responsibilities were moved as close as possible to the village, union council, tehsil and district levels, whereas the major policy-making, coordination, and special service functions left with the provincial governments.

Levels of devolution are:

1. Political devolution through the establishment of elected local government.
2. Fiscal decentralization through the transfer of funds to local government.
3. Administrative decentralization, to correspond with the new devolved political and fiscal arrangements.

Under devolution, there were no shifts of responsibility, power or authority from the federal to the provincial governments rather they were from provincial to districts. The Devolution Plan (2000) was materialized in the form of Local Government Ordinance, 2001.

The provincial governments promulgated the Local Government Ordinance, 2001 in their respective provinces to install a new integrated Local Government System with effect from 14 August 2001 to function within the provincial framework and adhere to the federal and provincial laws. The new system allowed public participation in decision-making. The essence of this system was that the local governments would be accountable to citizens for all their decisions and actions.

At the top tier, the district, there was a single integrated local government called District Government. The District Government consisted of Zila/District Nazim and District Administration. The District Administration, which comprised district offices including sub-offices at Tehsil level, was responsible to the District Nazim. The administration was responsible to serve the people. Adequate checks and balances have been introduced in the system. The new system effectively addressed the specific needs and problems of large cities. City

district governments were established in metropolitan cities like Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi and Multan. The formation and working procedure of district or city district government was same.

According to PLGO (2001) District Nazim was the chief executive of the district. He played visionary and leadership role in education as chief executive in the district (CPBEP, 2009). District Council approves district level education policy and budget prepared by EDO education and submitted through DCO and Zila Nazim (PLGO, 2001).

Factors affecting success or failure of decentralization in education. Kemmerer (1994) pointed out four factors that could lead to either the success or failure of decentralization in education. They are: cultural context in which devolution of education takes place, political support from national leaders and local elites, adequate planning management and last but not the least local empowerment.

The effect of devolution of authority to local school improves efficiency, equity, greater democratization and quality. (Naidoo, 2005). Fiszbein (1997) states successful decentralization depend upon how close and equitable relationships exist among different groups - community, government, private sector, NGO, etc. - at the local level. If such a relationship does not exist, the devolution is bound to meet with failure. Paqueo and Lammert, (2000) have described three rationales for decentralization in education. Administratively it seems to be the most efficient means of achieving particular educational goals; politically it gives maturation to the one at the bottom and extends their political power; and, ideologically it favours the beliefs that greater local autonomy is inseparable from aims related to particular views of the nature of individuals, society, and knowledge.

Devolution of authority to local governments. Devolution of authority to local government occurs when a government of central authority hands power to local government to make certain kinds of decisions regarding spending, staffing and education content (e.g., curriculum testing) which is being done by the formal agreement in a manner which

suggest a measure of irreversibility such as may occur with the change in constitution (Behrman, Deolalikar & Soon, 2002; Caldwell, 1994).

It is assumed that education controlled by local governments have better knowledge of the idiosyncratic preferences of the area regarding students, teachers and schools and the decision made as close as possible to the site of their implementation as the best and the most relevant information is brought to bear on them. They are in a better position to allocate funds and watch the production of outcomes more closely. Moreover, they care for equity (Burki, Perry, and Dillinger, 1999; Kemmerer, 1994). Decentralization of authority to local level has also been justified by efficiency as well as effectiveness rationale. Less bureaucratic procedure motivate officials to be more productive whereas centralized planning policies being expensive result in a decrease in the quality (Prawada, 1993).

In a study carried out by Corcoran, Fuhrman and Belcher (2001) the important role of districts played in providing vision, focus, support and coordination in instructional improvement at school level was analyzed. The findings showed that the central office staff members were struggling to define their roles and were in a fix to mention who should determine what was best. Either the schools should do it or the central office should let them know with its sole

purpose of reporting them. The researcher came out with the result “the decentralization of decision making appeared to be undermining the use of knowledge rather than promoting it” That is why the leaders in the district wanted the staff members to adopt an evidence based approach.

The purpose of this study was to explore the level of understanding of the devolution policy, the problems the District Nazims have been facing in the execution of their roles, their understanding of the educational problems and their strategies to resolve those issues.

Population and Sample. After categorization of the 35 districts into three groups with respect to literacy rate, the researchers randomly selected two districts from each of the three categories in order to conduct interviews with the District Nazims. It is a common belief that literacy rate of a district indicates its level of socio- economic development. Districts with high literacy rates are generally developed and those having low literacy rates lag behind with respect to socio-economic development. The purpose of categorizing district into three groups by their literacy rate was to ensure representation of districts with varied development level (low, medium and high developed districts). This technique also ensured participation of districts into the sample by their geographical location spread all over Punjab.

Table 1: Sampled Districts from Categories by Literacy Level

| Sr. No | Category of district | Rank order by literacy rate | Literacy rate range | Sampled districts | No. of selected districts |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. | A | 1-13 | 47.4 to 70.5 | Rawalpindi, Faisalabad | 02 |
| 2. | B | 14-22 | 36.8 to 47.3 | Khushab, Sheikhpura | 02 |
| 3. | C | 23-34 | 20.7 to 36.7 | Nankan Sahib, DG Khan | 02 |

Nature of the Study

The research design was exploratory and utilized a qualitative interpretative research approach employing semi-structured interviews

Instrumentation

Interview protocol for District Nazims was developed to assess their understanding level of decentralization.

Interview Recording. All interviews from District Nazims were recorded. The researcher visited the sampled Nazims individually and recorded the interviews. Formal letters to the interviewees were sent by the researcher at least a couple of weeks before the conduct of the interviews. The interviewees were asked to fix date and time as per their convenience and reconfirmed from them one or two days before the already fixed schedule. Data collection activity was carried out during 2008-09.

Development of interview protocol for District Nazims. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for District Nazims of the province of the Punjab to find out their level of understanding about the policy of decentralization in education, the problems they had been facing and the strategies they adopted to address those problems. The questions were developed on the roles and responsibilities of these offices as given in the decentralization document.

The interview questions were formulated in the light of the stated roles and duties of district Nazims. There were 17 key questions and some additional questions in the interview protocol for district Nazims. The additional questions were asked to the interviewees to solicit their opinion about different kinds of problems faced by them and suggestions and measures to address these problems.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

All Nazims were contacted in advance to seek their consent and appointment for interview. The researcher posted an interview protocol along with a brief description of the research so that they may

acquaint themselves with the research and prepare answers well.

The researcher interviewed six District Nazims. Four of the Nazims (66.7%) had a bachelor degree and two had matriculation certificate. Their age ranged between 50 to 60 years.

Understanding of the concept of decentralization. All the District Nazims had the basic concept of decentralization and its implications to some extent. They all had the same opinion about decentralization being a system to filter down administrative and financial powers to the grassroots level and in this case from provinces to districts. One of the District Nazims stated that *“the development made by Europe and USA in the field of social services owes a great deal to the devolved system of powers in those countries. He further added that the experiment of devolution in Pakistan was to break the bureaucratic colonial system of the British and to devolve the administrative and financial powers from bureaucrats and elites to elected people in district, town and union councils.”* He pointed out that this system has an ancient history globally and its success has been proven over the time.

Another Nazims who had been a member of parliament said that, *“I have spent five years in district council as well as in union council as elected member and also remained a member of National Assembly. This, I am telling you to establish that I have been in touch with all administrative and financial matters before devolution and observing these things very closely ever since 1977 and if I compare this post-devolution period with pre-devolution period, I would say that district got funds which they had never got in previous systems”.* Almost all District Nazims believed that though the system was in its infancy in Pakistan yet it had delivered beyond the expectations of the people irrespective of demographic location.

Initiative of decentralization in Pakistan. All Nazims believed that decentralization was the initiative of President Pervaiz Musharraf after October 1999 except for one who was of the opinion that the devolution plan was actually an implementation of the article 32 of the 1973

Constitution which states “*the state shall encourage local government institutions composed of elected representatives of the area concerned and in such institutions special representation will be given to peasants, workers and women.*”

Problems faced by the local governments in the Punjab. All Nazims believed that the devolution in general and particularly in education has following problems in Punjab.

Incomplete devolution. One of the Nazims was of the view that “The system is not fully decentralized as still many powers rest in the hands of provincial government. This is only 60 % of the total decentralization as 40 % are yet to be decentralized. It has been perceived that devolution plan has been implemented by careful and scrupulously designed evidence but the factual condition is that many flaws have been identified by the Nazims”. They believed that many powers like monitoring of school is still needed to be given to lower level of district government like town and union councils.

Bureaucratic hurdles. Implementation of decentralization was in the hands of bureaucracy which had great powers during colonial era and withdrawing from them all powers they had been enjoying for the last 150 years was in itself a hard nut to crack so they kept on creating hurdles. They were bent upon de-tracking the system as much as they could.

Lack of capacity building. One of the District Nazims stated, “There is lack of capacity building. The issue will have to be resolved through continuous training. Most of the employees were not efficiently trained to run the system properly. Education department being the largest and biggest stakeholder of the district government suffered a lot. HTs, DEOs and EDO were also not trained enough to understand and implement the system”.

Provincial government intrusion. One of the major problems which almost every Nazim expressed was the intrusion of provincial governments in district affairs. “They try to influence many decisions made by the local government”. Provincial government intervention was the most irritating factor for Nazims especially

for the ones who had no political affiliation with the ruling elite but at the same time one Nazim was of the opinion that if Nazims knew the prevailing culture, they should have known the strategies to tackle that problem.

MNAs and MPAs intrusion. On the one hand, they were under pressure of provincial governments and, on other hand, the pressures of MPAs and MNAs on district management had been on its peak. They kept on exerting influence in the development works and transfer / posting of employees.

Establishment of district cadre. One of the District Nazim said, “The provincial governments, besides, making promises has not yet taken solid initiatives to develop a district cadre of employees which will solve most of the problems”. Nazims believed that they would be in a better position to chalk out plans to train the employees whereas now in this case if they did they knew that the employees would get transferred as the powers of transfers still rested with the provincial governments.

Educational problems of the districts. When asked about the educational problems in their respective districts all Nazims said that the quality of education had been poor and the main reasons identified by them had been lack of physical infrastructure, shortage of teachers, schools without HTs, and high dropout rate. When asked about the role of decentralization in resolving the said problems they all believed that only this system had the ability to solve these problems if resources were provided well-in-time. One of the Nazims mentioned that teachers and HTs have to change their attitude of being underpaid. He said, “*They have to change their physical appearance and should adopt professional look.*” He further added to open up a model school with the same resources and facilities as are in government schools and hiring teachers on the same pay scale with professional outlook. He said, “*Their appearances do not correspond to appearance of good teachers especially in rural areas where teachers usually wear informal dresses even in schools*”. In this way, “*we would like to show good results only with the change in attitude as well as appearance of the teachers.*”

Devolution, as a tool for the solution of educational problems. The researcher presented

some closed ended questions before Nazims to discover their perception about how devolution

could be helpful in solving various problems. The responses are given in the table.

Table 2: Nazims' Opinion about Decentralization as an Agent for Solution of Educational Problems

| Issues | Level of influence in frequencies | | | | | \bar{X} | SD |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|--------------|-----|
| | I don't know | Not at all | A little | To some extent | To a large extent | Max. value=5 | |
| Improvement of school plant | | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4.50 | .54 |
| Monitoring of the schools | | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4.50 | .83 |
| Increasing students' enrolment. | | | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4.33 | .81 |
| Teacher absenteeism | | | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4.33 | .81 |
| HTs accountability | | | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4.33 | .81 |
| Equity within the district schools | | | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4.33 | .81 |
| Improving teacher student ratio | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4.17 | .75 |
| Teachers' accountability | | | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4.17 | .98 |
| Efficiency of school council | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3.33 | 1.3 |
| Controlling dropout | | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3.00 | 1.6 |

The table shows some interesting facts and figures about Nazims' opinion regarding decentralization as an instrument in resolving educational problems. Majority of the Nazims believed that the decentralization in education from provincial government to districts could solve many educational problems like increasing enrolment, controlling teachers' absenteeism, equity within the district schools, improvement of school plant, monitoring teachers' and HTs' accountability. One of the Nazims stated that it was not possible for this system to control dropout as many factors contribute to it i.e. poor economic background and distance of schools from home and parents' income education. Another Nazim stated that improvement in enrolment could occur with the provision of transportation to school teachers especially female teachers who had to travel a long distance to reach schools.

Training and Development. The Nazims indicated that they lacked training for their duties and had little grasp of the nature of devolution when applied to education. There was also an inadequate provision of training for district employees. In

looking at what training was available, that provided by provincial government was considered to be completely unsatisfactory while that provided by NGOs or by the Military Staff College was considered good. Only one District Nazim appreciated the importance of continuous professional development for the teachers and Head teachers.

Issues of Power. They felt that the authorities, political government and establishments lack a commitment to give the time to see the decentralization moving forward adequately. They wanted more power devolved to the district level and less held centrally, the view being that those at District level were better equipped to take decisions, to appoint staff and establish priorities.

Establishment of district management cadre. Two of the District Nazims strongly recommended establishing district management cadre as soon as possible in order to root out provincial government intervention. They felt that it would help district to frame need based training for them and it would tend to minimize HTs', DOs and EDOs fear of being

transferred as well as district governments apprehensions of wastages of funds which they would spend on the training of such officials who might be transferred to other districts. At the time of survey their transfer and posting was in the hands of provincial officials.

Funds from federal and provincial governments. One of the Nazims said, "*Funds from provincial and district government for big projects are usually given on the basis of "connections"*". Some Nazims showed total dissatisfaction over this process and blamed the high-ups showing nepotism. Moreover, they thought that federal or provincial governments had provided sufficient funds through MNAs and MPAs but those were spent by them without consulting District Government.

Apprehensions of district Nazims. The Nazims had a general perception that provincial political governments and MPA's considered that if the decentralized system of the district governments would run with the pace as decided and implemented in its true spirit, they would become worthless and that was the reason behind the efforts of destabilizing the whole plan. Nazims perceived that MPAs and MNAs had always been involved in developmental works in their constituency e.g. construction of roads, streets, and drainage system. With the devolution of all these tasks to district, town and union councils, they started considering it as a threat to their political powers in their constituencies.

Life as Nazim. Almost all Nazims except one claimed that being District Nazim had adversely affected their lives. They have become patients of blood pressure. There was only one Nazim who claimed that being industrialist he already knew how to cope with the pressure and that he enjoyed it considering it as a service to the nation. The researcher explored that these District Nazims except one needed training in stress management. All except one looked frustrated while talking about the burden they had to carry.

Issues relating to Nazims. The educational backgrounds of the Nazims were perhaps inadequate. They need to have higher qualifications and to have some experience at national or provincial levels of management. The Nazims had

set up procedures at district level to formulate plans for the district but had no experience as to how to devolve powers to schools. They lacked knowledge and experience of the functioning of schools councils and how they could assist schools. Perhaps being caught between the over-centralized powers at national and provincial levels and with inadequate experience at school levels, they felt under tension, with little job satisfaction.

Findings and Conclusions. Following were the findings from the interviews of the District Nazims.

Nazims with higher education and having good exposure as member of national or provincial assembly and academic background had better perception of devolution as compared with those having low exposure and qualifications. However, no District Nazim had perception to decentralize administrative powers from the district to school for school based management. Most of the Nazims had little knowledge of school councils and their importance in minimizing different problems of the schools. Only one district Nazim knew the importance of the continuous professional development of the teachers as well as for HTs.

All Nazims stated that decentralization could not bear full benefits unless more administrative and financial powers were given to district. They wanted the authorities, political government and establishment to allow more time to this decentralized system as they felt that it would give more benefits with the passage of time. They also demanded for establishing a district cadre with full powers of hiring, firing and promotion of personnel in the hands of the district government. They believed that only in this way they would be in a position to avoid any intrusion of provincial or federal governments into district government affairs.

The district education was marred with problems like poor quality of education, low enrolments, poor retention rate, shortage of teachers and HTs, and finally lack of infrastructure facilities in schools. They all considered that decentralization in the real sense was the only tool through which all these problems could be solved gradually.

Nazims were mostly dissatisfied with the trainings conducted by provincial government but

highly satisfied with the training given by NGOs or by the Military Staff College.

Nazims need training in attracting funding from provincial and federal government. They also need more awareness and training for playing effective role for school improvement. However all District Nazims had established a district data base for the formulation of future plans for these districts.

All Nazims felt undue intrusion in school matters from the influential people, government and the public representatives i.e. MNAs and MPAs. According to them government functionaries and public representatives made decisions even about participation of Nazims in training, on the basis of 'nepotism' and 'connections'. Similarly, decisions about school improvement and up-gradation were political and not fact based.

All Nazims except one felt overburdened and full of tensions after they held the post of District Nazims

Implications of the study

The findings of this article have important implications for political leadership of the district. Indeed, there is a growing need for leadership development and training of District Nazims keeping in view their needs in performing their roles and responsibilities as District Nazims. First of all, District Nazims should be properly trained after they take over to this responsibility. The training imparted should be based on their local needs and plans for district. Secondly, they must be educated that decentralization does not mean to trickle down powers from province to district level administration only rather it also means devolving administrative political and financial powers to lower levels of district administration such as union council and the school.. Thirdly, they must be trained about the existing educational problems of the district and strategies they can adopt to address those problems successfully. Last but not the least; they should realize that their problems would increase if they retain all powers in their hands. They have to be willing in devolving powers as much as they can to avoid any fuss which they have due to over burden on them.

The policy makers should also revisit the pre requisite academic qualification to become a District Nazim. It may be raised from matriculation to intermediate. The fact based merit policy should be followed strictly by the District Nazims, higher government functionaries and the political representatives i.e. MNAs and MPAs.

As an epilogue, it is mentioned that all District Nazims felt that the devolved system is the best to address all local issues. But the tenure of District Nazims ended in December 2009 and new elections were not conducted. Instead District Administrations have been appointed in February 2010 vide Notification NO.SOR(LG)39-6/2008 by Government of the Punjab to manage all those matters. Hybrid systems of governments have emerged in Sindh and Khyber Pakhton khawah (KPK). it is recommended that devolved system should be allowed to function for sometimes to capture the local talent, interest and create ownership for improvement of the educational system

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Note: Interview protocol is available from the authors