

Decentralization of Education in Rural Kyrgyzstan

By: Mrs. Elvira Bobekova*

As a result of varied experiences of decentralization in different countries, the decentralization of education is currently a much-debated policy issue in international development.^{1,2,3} The worldwide shift towards educational decentralization in recent decades both in developing and developed countries has been one consequence of economic globalization. The move towards market-based decision-making has made it difficult for governments to attract more funding for social programs.⁴ Also, the combination of increases in both the administrative burden and enrollment rates has weakened state management of education. For these reasons, proponents of the decentralized form of educational governance argue that it is the more efficient way of governing and controlling the quality of education.⁵ One of the central premises of decentralization is that communities know best and, given the authority, they can ensure that schooling is more efficient because both parents and stakeholders keep school administrations accountable and contribute to the sustenance of schools.⁶ Opponents argue that for the benefits of decentralization to accrue, there should be preconditions so that those at local levels have the financial and intellectual resources to contribute, make funding accountable and efficient, and know what constitutes effective management.^{7,8}

Even though the benefits of decentralization remain controversial, many developing countries have turned to a decentralized form of educational governance.^{9,10} However, a number of empirical studies have shown that the outcomes of decentralization in the context of development are mixed.¹¹ While some studies highlight successful results of decentralization and educational improvements (footnote 6), others are not so encouraging (footnote 8).¹² This paper sets out to understand the decentralization process in the post-Soviet Kyrgyz Republic with special attention to rural schools and their communities' capacity to sustain them under

* Mrs. Elvira Bobekova is a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic. She is a student at the University of Auckland in Auckland, New Zealand.

¹ Bray, M. 1996. *Community and Government Financing of Education: Finding Appropriate Balances, Series on Making Education Systems Work: Strategies for Successful Decentralization*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

² Chapman, D. 1998. The management and administration of education across Asia: Changing challenges. *International Journal of Educational Development* 29(7): 603-626.

³ Chapman, D. 2000. Trends in educational administration in developing Asia. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 36(2): 283-308.

⁴ Welsh, T., and N. F. McGinn. 1999. *Decentralization of Education: Why, When, What and How*. Paris: UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning.

⁵ Fiske, E. 1996. *Decentralization of Education: Politics and Consensus*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁶ Bray, M. 1996. *Decentralization of Education: Community Financing*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁷ Chapman, D., and D. Adams. 1998. The quality of education in Asia: The perennial priority. *International Journal of Educational Research* 29: 643-665.

⁸ Hannaway, J. 1995. *The Problems and Promise of Top-Down Decentralization: The Case of India. Paper presented at the World Bank Seminar on Educational Decentralization*, The World Bank, Washington, DC, 2 June.

⁹ Maclure, R. 1994. Misplaced assumptions of decentralization and participation in rural communities: Primary school reform in Burkina Faso. *Comparative Education* 30 (3): 239-254.

¹⁰ Weiler, H. N. 1990. Comparative perspectives on educational decentralization: An exercise in contradiction? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12(4): 433-448.

¹¹ Chapman, D., E. Barcikowski, M. Sowah, E. Gyamera and G. Woode. 2002. Do communities know best? Testing a premise of educational decentralization: community members' perceptions of their local schools in Ghana. *International Journal of Educational Development* 22: 181-189.

¹² Anderson, G. 1998. Toward authentic participation: deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education. *American Educational Research Journal* 35(4): 571-603.

decentralized management. The ideas about the hindrances to educational decentralization in rural Kyrgyz Republic derive from the author's field research.

The collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991 had a tremendous disruptive impact on the economic and social institutional structures of the Kyrgyz Republic. Despite the sound basis of universal literacy developed by the USSR under a centralized education system, the new independent state pursued educational reforms, the primary feature of which was decentralization. The push for decentralization came from the shift to a market economy that made it difficult for the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to finance education. A decentralized approach to education was seen as the path to development for a country striving to build a democratic society. Decentralization was also seen as a way to relieve the financial burden of running schools and improve the quality of school education. The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic shifted partial financial responsibility for schools to local governments and delegated some autonomy to schools, assuming that decentralization would increase the participation and accountability of key school actors, attract local resources, and improve the quality of education.

The relative autonomy granted to the schools allowed private schools and special schools such as lyceums and gymnasiums to emerge.¹³ Schools also gained the right to customize their curriculum in response to local needs. Local governments became financially responsible for schools, but were not able to execute their responsibilities.¹⁴ One of the reasons for this was that the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic did not delegate real authority to the local governments. Decentralization theory suggests that the power delegated to lower levels is the main factor in engaging local stakeholders, who in return support the school financially. Yet it was the Ministry of Education that specified class sizes and maximum and minimum teaching hours per teacher, and as such, limited local governments' ability to make decisions on consolidation, staffing, and achieving efficiency in school financing (footnote 14). Moreover, the right to appoint school principals remained with the Regional Department of Education. Thus, local governments had little incentive to fund their schools. Mertaugh (2004) argues that the disconnection between responsibilities and the ability to implement them is the reason that no funding comes to schools. He believes that this gap should be removed (footnote 14). Often it occurs that the central government reserves the right to control the quality of education. Unless local governments are provided the room and means to act, it is unlikely that decentralization will succeed.

Even when real power is delegated to local governments, school revenues will not necessarily increase, because local governments can themselves be lacking funds. Local governments cannot collect taxes effectively or, alternatively, the taxes they do collect are so inadequate that they continue to require government subsidies. Indeed, the weak tax base in developing countries reduces what they can collect.^{15,16} The lack of funds and resources available to local governments is one of the main factors hindering the implementation of decentralization in developing countries.¹⁷

¹³ These schools are public schools, but their curriculum is focused beyond standard programs. They provide more teaching hours for English language, mathematics, economy, ecology, etc. Such schools may collect the fees that are believed necessary to cover the expenses of the additional services.

¹⁴ Mertaugh, M. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with particular reference to the Kyrgyz Republic. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia*, edited by S. P. Heyneman and A. J. De Young. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

¹⁵ Blumberg, S. K. 1981. A Tribute to Luther Gulick. *Public Administration Review*, 41(2): 247.

¹⁶ Rondinelli, D. 1995. Financing the decentralization of education services and facilities. In *Decentralizing the Governance of Education: Workshop Supplementary Readings*, edited by M. Puma and D. Rondinelli. Washington DC: Abt Associates, Inc.

¹⁷ Cheema, G. S., and D. Rondinelli. 1983. *Decentralization and Development*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Proponents of decentralization also assume that it allows for the involvement of more societal institutions and groups, local communities, and parents, who can distribute resources more efficiently. In return for their greater role in influencing decision-making, they are supposed to contribute additional resources to cover the costs of education.¹⁸

In the context of developing countries, the possibility of attracting more private resources to education is precarious (footnote 11).¹⁹ Increasing poverty in rural parts of the Kyrgyz Republic hinders private contributions to schools. It also prevents some parents from sending children to school due to their inability to buy books, school supplies, and clothes.²⁰ Requiring children to buy or rent textbooks puts them out of reach for some poor children (footnote 14).²¹

The trend to rely on non-budgetary sources threatens to increase the inequality between rural and urban communities, or in other words, between the poor and the wealthy (footnote 1).^{22, 23} A research study conducted in Central Asian countries noted that decentralization has had a detrimental effect on the poor in rural areas in that it has resulted in unequal access to education (footnote 20). The reason is that schools currently rely only on parents' contributions to cover other expenses. Some urban schools can generate additional resources, but rural schools cannot attract private money and as a result, are not able to provide adequate school facilities. The complete reliance on parents' contributions makes quality education accessible mostly to privileged children from urban cities.²⁴

Decentralization is supposed to make teachers and school administrators accountable to parents and stakeholders. However, there is still a lack of involvement and participation from parents. Moreover, De Young (2002) notes that local school administrations lack enough knowledge and management skills to benefit from a decentralized system.²⁵ Local beneficiaries in rural areas are ill prepared to institute the checks and balance needed for more decentralized, participatory school management (footnote 9). During the Soviet era, the Kyrgyz Republic's education system benefited from centrally developed curriculum, teacher training, and textbooks and other educational materials. In decentralizing education, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic failed to consider how teachers and school directors would be trained, how taxes would be raised locally, and how communities would make the resources accountable in a country where no local expertise in such matters existed (footnote 14).

Field research findings implied that even though many parents do not want to contribute to schools, they are more willing to invest in higher education for their children. The reason is the high rate of return from higher education, which is estimated at about 25% in Central Asian

¹⁸ McGinn, N., and S. Street. 1986. Educational decentralization: Weak state or strong state? *Comparative Education Review* 30 (4): 471-490.

¹⁹ Naidoo, J. 2005. Education decentralization in Africa: Great expectations and unfulfilled promises. In *Global Trends in Educational Policy*, edited by D. Baker and A. W. Wiseman. Oxford: Elsevier.

²⁰ Open Society Institute. 2002. *Education Development in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Challenges and Ways Forward*. Budapest: Soros Foundation.

²¹ Drummond, T., and A. De Young. 2004. Perspectives and problems in education reform in Kyrgyzstan: The case of National Scholarship testing. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia*, edited by S. P. Heyneman and A. J. De Young. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

²² Petrovich, J., and A.S. Wells. 2005. *Bringing Equity Back: Research for a New Era in American Educational Policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Columbia University.

²³ Steiner-Khamsi, G., and I. Stolpe. 2004. Decentralization and recentralization reform in Mongolia: Tracing the swing of the pendulum. *Comparative Education* 40(1): 29-53.

²⁴ Klugman, J. 1999. Financing and governance of education in Central Asia. *MOCT-MOST* 4: 423-442.

²⁵ DeYoung, A. 2002. West meets East in Central Asia: Competing discourses on secondary education reform in the Kyrgyz Republic. *International Journal of Educational Research Policy and Practice* 3(3): 1-45.

countries.²⁶ Anderson et al (2004) also revealed that there is no return from secondary education without additional training. There is a high interest in providing children with a university degree, as shown by the increase over the last five years in the number of students enrolled in higher education from 65,000 to 159,000, and the increase in the number of universities from 33 to 114.²⁷

However, there are serious concerns regarding both the quality of universities and the fairness of access to them. Field research revealed that rural villagers believe that regardless of students' performance at school, university access is only for students from wealthy families. This is because universities in the Kyrgyz Republic have established very low entrance requirements. Basically, anyone who can pay tuition fees is accepted (footnote 14). Phipps and Wolanin argue that in the Kyrgyz Republic,

Corruption makes higher education fundamentally unfair: the undeserving are allowed to obtain academic places and credentials, while the deserving ones are denied the higher education opportunities.²⁸

Thus students from families of modest means who cannot pay university tuition fees are deprived of the opportunity to get higher education despite their merit (footnote 21). There is no reason for parents to invest in schooling if their children can only continue to work in subsistence farming, for which they need no education.

During interviews, it was revealed that if parents believe that their children cannot access higher education, they are not willing to invest in their children's schooling because they see more return from child labor than from schooling. Sedere (2000) also argued that if parents believe that schooling will not improve and bring a visible change in lives of their children, they are likely to withdraw pupils from schools.²⁹

Corruption and unfairness in higher education has led to the situation where even wealthy parents are reluctant to contribute to schools because they believe that their children can get into university simply by paying tuition fees. This has strengthened the belief that the quality of school education does not play a role in accessing higher education. Thus, parents would prefer to save the money that can guarantee access to a university rather than contribute it to a school to improve the quality of education there. Educational quality has little value because the relationship between the quality of schooling that usually provides access to university has been undermined.

After analyzing decentralization policies in different countries, Prawda (1993), along with Welsh and McGinn (1999) concluded that only countries with certain preconditions can successfully implement the decentralization process (footnote 4).³⁰ First, there should be

²⁶ Anderson, H., R. Pomfret and N. Usseinova. 2004. Education in Central Asia during the transition to a market economy. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia*, edited by S. P. Heyneman and A. J. De Young. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

²⁷ Report of the Working Group Examining the Rationalization and Funding of Higher Education in the Kyrgyz Republic. 2001. June.

²⁸ Phipps, R. A., and T. R. Wolanin. 2001. *Higher Education Reform Initiatives in Kyrgyzstan, Final Report to the Ministry of Education and Culture Eurasia Foundation, Institute of Higher Education Policy.*

²⁹ Sedere, U. M. 2000. *Globalization and the Low Income Economies: Reforming Education: The Crisis of Vision.* Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers.

³⁰ Prawda, J. 1993. Educational decentralization in Latin America: Lessons learned. *International Journal of Educational Development* 13(3): 262.

political support and commitment for changes from all levels, and those who are involved in the process should be capable of carrying it out (footnote 4). Another precondition is the availability of financial, human, and physical resources. In most cases decentralization failed where one of these conditions was not met. Either decentralization was not supported by all stakeholders involved in education, or those who were involved did not have enough experience and skills in collective decision-making and organizational management (footnote 4). Therefore, for decentralization to succeed, it requires resources and efforts at the central level. Much training for school principals, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders is necessary. However, it takes time for directors, teachers and other participants to gain these skills.

Decentralization is largely seen by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic as a cost saving policy, but the reality is that the center must provide the required expertise and financial flow in order to sustain and nurture its successful implementation. Much of the success of decentralization depends on the parents' and local actors' attitudes, actions, and performance. Therefore, information is an essential part of the successful implementation of decentralization. Parents and school administrators need to be given relevant information, at least about simple indicators of relative performance such as preparation of teachers, spending per child, and educational outcomes.³¹

Decentralization does not guarantee efficiency. This is only developed through experience. Accountability cannot simply come into being. It needs to be nurtured. Decentralization is a complex process that involves actors and institutions outside the schools. Therefore, any reform to the education system requires a holistic approach. Currently in the Kyrgyz Republic, decentralization is rhetorical. The reasons for this are much more complicated than stated here, because it is not a linear process and it involves a number of interconnected institutions.

³¹ Birdsall, N., R. Levine and A. Ibrahim. 2005. *Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, Incentives, and Institutions*. Sterling, VA: Earthscan.