Autonomy in School Management – A Policy Perspective

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Abstract

School management reforms, being practiced in many countries, are challenging the conventional education governance structures by aiming at increasing school autonomy and empowering localized decision making. In India also, efforts are underway to encourage autonomy in management of schools. This paper is an integral part of the doctoral dissertation in management area – 'A study of Management Practices of Secondary Schools'. The objective of this paper is to explore the present status of autonomy in school management and to study the need for more autonomy among the major categories of school managements. A sample of 188 secondary schools was selected through stratified sampling technique. The primary data was collected through self designed questionnaire and interview schedules. Chi-Square Test and simple percentages were used to analyze the data with the help of SPSS-19. The findings reveal that administrative and financial autonomy was not prevalent while partial autonomy was experienced in academic aspect. A majority of respondents from all categories of school managements opted for autonomy in all aspects –administrative, academic, and financial. However, a strong voice for complete autonomy emerges from the unaided schools.

INTRODUCTION

The government of every nation tries to initiate the transformation of schools, this though can be achieved when systematic and sustained change occurs resulting in improved outcomes for all students in all settings, thus making a contribution to the social and economic well-being of a nation. School based management serves as one of the strategies to achieve this envisaged transformation. School autonomy is an integral feature of school based management in which schools are delegated with decision-making authority over their operations. School management under autonomy facilitates an important role to the School Council which embodies the interests of

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parents and enables school budget planning and approval. Thus by including the School Council in school management, school autonomy fosters accountability (Di Gropello, 2006; Barrera, Fasih and Patrinos, 2009). Advocates of this innovative system of school management point-out a wide range of potential benefits. They argue that the devolution of decision-making authority to schools can facilitate and enhance participation – a core strategy in the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

School based management has been existent in policy as well as practice for more than three decades, today though there are very few nations that have not moved down this track (Caldwell, 2005). The origins of school management reforms can be traced to the United States in 1980's and Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom in the 1990's. Similar programs have also been adopted in some developing countries viz. Latin America and South Asia, though sub-Saharan Africa also figures with increasing prominence. During the1980s and 90s, a large number of thinkers and institutions advocated the idea of strengthening the autonomy of the school as a way of overcoming educational problems. If schools are held accountable for results, they must be given the resources and decision-making authority to design and implement strategies to achieve high student performance (Cecilia, 2001).

A number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Netherlands and Sweden, have embarked on sweeping measures to promote public school autonomy. Though the motives and incentives for school autonomy are often diverse, it is commonly believed that decentralization will enhance the quality of schooling. The main idea is a top-to-down transfer of competency to the level of the individual school. Decisions formerly made by ministries or other school authorities are delegated to boards/ committees consisting of teachers, headmasters, community members, parents and also sometimes former pupils at local schools. They become directly involved in making decisions regarding academic, administrative and financial matters. This enable schools to develop a unique identity that distinguishes them from other similar institutions. Thus by decreasing bureaucratic restrains, the efficiency of the individual school can be improved.

Low-quality education is an endemic problem in most developing countries. International tests of student achievement consistently show that developing countries score at the bottom of the performance scale. In many countries, raising education quality has replaced expanding coverage as the principal challenge facing education ministries. Hanushek (2002) proves large economic gains associated with improvements in education quality by finding that a one standard deviation increase in student achievement would yield a one percent increase in the rate of per capita economic growth and, in 30 years, would generate a $1.4 trillion change in gross domestic product (GDP) of USA. Caroline Hoxby of Harvard University argues that independent management of schools is one of three essential elements that will help drive education improvements using a

school choice program. The World Development Report provides a framework for determining how decentralization may affect accountability (World Bank, 2004). Julie Novak (2006) said that centralized government departments have an inherent inertia that impedes change, leaving school principals with far too little power and responsibility for the services they are supposed to deliver. A growing number of studies have sought to identify the characteristics that make some schools more effective in delivering educational success for their students. In England, the 1980s and 1990s saw a substantial delegation of control from local education authorities (LEAs) to individual schools, which are now largely responsible for their own expenditure and resourcing decisions (EURYDICE, 2007).

Institutional autonomy can be distinguished in two ways- substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy (Berdahl, 1971). Substantive autonomy covers the sphere of academics and procedural autonomy covers the non-academic areas. There are three models of how governments manage more autonomous institutions in a state supervised system (Fielden, 2008). They are: i) delegation from centre to lower tiers of government; ii) delegation to a specialized buffer body; and iii) delegation to the academic institution themselves. Most systems across the world are covered under the first two models. When states delegate to lower tiers of government, the centre continue to play a central coordinating role and retain control over setting size and scope of the sector, strategic planning, negotiating overall funding with Ministry of Finance, and coordinating with other ministries. By delegating power to a buffer body, the centre delegates authority over all elements of funding and operations to the buffer body. The centre is left with coordinating broader policy issues. To ensure that buffer bodies have the power to ensure compliance and accountability, it is essential that these bodies have the financial power to allocate and withdraw funds.

School Autonomy-The Indian Context

Despite India having devolved management to the state level and having one of the older quality assurance systems in the region, a productive balance of autonomy and accountability has not been achieved. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC, 2006) describes the governance structure of Indian education sector as 'over-regulated and under governed.' Consequently, the existing system is over wielding with overlapping areas of accountability which not only limit institutional autonomy but also fail to offer adequate and appropriate levels of accountability. It has been widely felt that Indian school system has continuously been failing to produce results *pro rata* to the resources allocated. The education sector in India has not yet fully internalized the developments in the field of management and continues to look at educational planning, administration and organization as aliens. The 'Challenges of Education', the 'National Policy on Education - 1986', the 'Program of Action – 1992' and many subsequent documents and reports

brought this mutual exclusivity into focus and emphasized the need for professionalization of educational management. These reports realized that success in implementation of the National Policy on Education would be a function of its management process. Dr. H.S.Singha, Chairman, Central Board of Secondary Education, said that the concept of school autonomy was a commendable one and it would be advisable to make distinction between academic autonomy and administrative autonomy and suggested that a beginning may preferably be made with the former. Pradip N. Khandwalla of Indian Institute of Management, argued for setting up district educational councils that are run by elected members of the teaching community, with representation from panchayats, voluntary organizations, district collectorate, etc. All the funds relating to primary and secondary education should be turned over to these councils. Raghurama of Bharatiya Shikshana Mandal recommended for establishment of an autonomous National Education Authority which should be manned by educationists and educators without any sort of governmental interference. State and district units of the same authority will decentralize its functions. The Government will have the responsibility of financing the Authority only. Many educational experts proposed that the concepts of management and planning have to be made permanent features of the education system and too frequent changes in management styles must be avoided. Academic autonomy combined with administrative autonomy should be tried at the school level as it is assumed that finances are provided by the State in Government and Aided Institutions. The management and control of education should be handed over to an Autonomous Statutory Agency at the National level as well as at state and other levels, in which educationists should have majority The working of this agency should be independent like judiciary. The administration of education should be de-governmentalized by involving voluntary agencies more in educational administration. Wherever voluntary initiative is not forthcoming or is insufficient, government should set up autonomous organizations and should not run educational institutions on its own. All existing government institutions should be handed over to the autonomous bodies (GOI, 1990).

According to Jean Drèse and Gasdar (1997), 'the most striking weakness of the schooling system in rural Uttar Pradesh is not so much the deficiency of physical infrastructure but the poor utilization of the existing facilities. It is, in fact, important to note that in the context of development of India, the management of services sector assumes not only importance but is central to the development process itself. Education as a critical service sector and the agencies of education, a critical face of this angle, has been suffering from lack of professional management. Many committees on education and specifically, school education have referred to the aspect of school management reforms. Indian government has been making efforts to implement these recommendations through some reforms. By strengthening the management aspects through reforms,' at both the organizational as well as institutional level, the school education sector can be improved on par with the developed economies. Raju (2006) recommends autonomy not only for the private and self financed institutions, but also for the institutions which are under the government either fully

or partly financed. The type of autonomy should ensure that the stakeholders are protected, particularly the students, against dilution in quality. It is also very important that accountability must follow autonomy. A study conducted by the Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, in 2005 (Singh, 2006), stressed that the major problem lay not in the level of financial allocations, but rather in the organizational inefficiencies, lack of accountability and misutilization of funds. The effectiveness of education depends largely on how well its units of service are managed. Education can be made more relevant to the user through incorporating professional management at school level. The National Knowledge Commission of India (2009) has proposed to encourage decentralization, local autonomy in management of schools, flexibility in disbursal of funds to improve quality and generate accountability, improving school infrastructure and revamping school inspection with a greater role for local stakeholders.

As India is progressing in achieving the goals of accessibility and enrolment in school education, this is the time to shift concentration towards the management issues for making the system result oriented. Better models of management can be derived for Indian school system by analyzing the school based management practices followed around the world. Thus, concentration on management of schools serves as a tool for 'turn around' of school education sector in India. In this context, the present article aims at exploring the status of autonomy experienced in school management at secondary level among the major categories of managements.

Review Of Literature

Hoxby and Muraka (2009) found that lotteried-in pupils experience significant improvements in both their maths scores and reading scores between the third and eighth grade – increasing by 0.09 standard deviations and 0.04 standard deviations respectively for each year they spend at the charter school – compared to the lotteried-out pupils who remained in traditional public schools. They also look at the link between certain school polices and their impact on achievement and found that a longer school year/day is associated with positive achievement effects.

Finnigan (2007) found that many charter schools in England do not have high levels of autonomy, with schools least likely to have control over budgetary decisions. In addition, school autonomy is influenced by state laws, relationships with authorizers, and partnerships with educational management organizations and community-based organizations. Finally, the levels of autonomy in some schools were dynamic, with schools experiencing less autonomy over time. Gunnar and Deon (2007) found that, in Argentine schools, autonomy and participation raised student test scores in a multiplicative way. Gertler et al (2006) studied the school autonomy system in Mexico and found that the AGES program in Mexico gives minimal autonomy to school councils, which are run mainly by parents.

Karpade, Ashok and Meghanathan (2004) made 'an extensive study of successful school management in India: Case studies of Navodaya vidyalayas' and found that successful schools adopted systematic and participative management system in running the activities of schools. The study also revealed that people in managerial positions were delegated autonomy but also made them responsible for successful completion of the tasks. The study observes that by following systematic management process, the heads of schools could set higher and higher goals for themselves and for their schools and achieve them with team work and efficient managerial practices. Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP) has undertaken case studies on successful school management to understand how specific schools improve and to encapsulate the road to success which a school's management adopts. Thirty case studies were undertaken in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka covering rural and urban, public and private schools, with sizeable or limited resources (IIEP, 2004).

Some other studies (Ouchi & Segal, 2003; Volansky & Friedman, 2003; Fullan & Watson, 2000) have highlighted the importance of local decision-making in school management taking account of priorities in the local setting, including a capacity to identify needs and monitor outcomes. Also evident was the importance of building the capacity of the community to support the efforts of schools.

A qualitative study of schools with outstanding results in seven Latin American countries concluded that success was underpinned by the quality of school-level management and the effectiveness of classroom teaching practice. It was concluded that in terms of links with the central administrative level, it should be noted that these schools base a good part of their success on their autonomous operation, taking advantage of trends at the central level to move toward increasingly more decentralized administrative and pedagogical models (LLECE, 2002). **Sjoerd Karsten's** work (1998) demonstrates that despite the pursuit of administrative reform in the Netherlands, an intermediary administrative tier has come into being between the central government and schools, which further complicates the relationship between these two levels. One effect of such a buffer zone could be that, while schools and school boards continue to feel the sense of powerlessness and lack of autonomy characteristic of earlier times, the government's sense of central responsibility is weakened. It is the responsibility of the heads of the schools to translate the specific pre-established goals into reality through mobilizing the team effort with their leadership skills and managerial prowess. This process obviously demands a great degree of autonomy in functioning.

Geraint (1995) presented an analysis of the impact of different levels of school autonomy on costs across the USA which suggests that it is possible to identify an optimal level of devolution of decision-making authority. Academic performance, on the other hand, appears not to be

affected by such organizational variables. Terry and Chubb (1990) found that a critical reason why private schools appear to be more effective than public schools is because of their organizational characteristics, which are linked to their autonomy.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To explore the present status of autonomy in managing the schools.

2. To understand the perceptions of the school heads towards autonomy in school management.

Methodology

Stratified sampling has been utilized to draw the sample from the finite universe of 557 secondary schools operating under the three major types of management in Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh in India. The sample has been made largely representative by selecting 188 secondary schools accounting for around 34% of the population and representing 49 out of a total of 50 mandal administrative units. The primary data is collected through self designed questionnaire and interview schedules from the Headmasters / Principals of the select secondary schools. The data is analyzed through Chi-Square Test with the help of SPSS version 19, to establish the consistency of the responses.

Results And Analysis

Each institution has personality of its own and must develop itself to optimize its full potential. Each school is considered, instead of a simple agency for providing educational service, as an independent entity with individually defined specific objectives and managerial practices. The school stands at the centre of the concept and serves as the basis for scientific management practices. In this context the status and perceptions of school heads towards autonomy in terms of administrative autonomy, academic autonomy and financial autonomy are provided hereunder.

Discussion:

1. **Administrative Autonomy:**

   Autonomy in school management is not clearly defined in any of the circulars and manuals circulated by the educational administration. No guidance is provided by the educational administrators for the school managements regarding administrative autonomy and delegation of powers in school management. Majority of the school heads from all the categories of management - around 80% of public sector; 60% of the aided and 50% of

the unaided schools, felt that they were not experiencing autonomy in school management (Figure-1).

2. **Academic Autonomy:**

All the respondents agreed that they were enjoying academic autonomy but with varying degrees. The continuum spreads from a relatively lesser degree of academic autonomy in public sector schools to a higher degree in the private unaided schools.

3. **Financial Autonomy**

The argument in favour of decentralizing a significant amount of the system budget to the school level is that there is a unique mix of student learning needs in the school and that calls for a unique mix of resources of all kinds. It is no longer possible for such a mix to be determined at the centre, whether it be for the standard allocation of staff or the determination of how money should be spent on supplies, equipment, and services. The challenge under these circumstances is to design an appropriate resource allocation model that will distribute resources in a fair and transparent way, ensuring that schools have a 'global budget' that enables them to resource efforts to meet the unique mix of local learning needs. A resource allocation model usually takes account of the number of students, level of schooling, special education needs, and the location of the school. There is considerable experience in several nations in doing this work (Ross & Levacic, 1999). Thus the major area of concern is the financial autonomy.

The public sector schools do not experience financial autonomy while the private category enjoys partial autonomy. The heads of the aided and unaided schools are allowed to participate in financial decision making with certain limitations where as their counterparts from public sector don't have any say in fiscal planning which is highly centralized in the hands of educational bureaucracy and ministry.

However, all the school managements unanimously felt a strong bureaucratic control and strict compliance to the rules and regulations framed by the educational administration in school management. Around 60% of the public sector school managements strongly expressed the need to reform the existing centralized bureaucracy while all the private managements are looking for a speedy reform of the same.

The perceptions of the school heads regarding the demand for more autonomy in all the three – administrative, academic and financial, aspects of autonomy in school management are analyzed through Chi Square test for establishing the goodness of fit and the strength of association and to understand the pattern of responses.

Goodness of fit:

Table-1: Test Statistics for goodness of fit (SPSS Output).

	Autonomy in school management
Chi-Square	11.660[a]
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.009

a.   0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency

    Is 47.0.

The chi square value of 11.660 with a p value of 0.009 is statistically significant (Table-1). In other words, these results indicate that the obtained frequencies differ significantly from those that would be expected if all cell frequencies were equal in the population, thus establishing the goodness of fit of the responses collected.

Association and pattern:

After establishing the goodness of fit, the data is tested to analyze the nature of association between the two categorical variables taken for the study - type of school management and the perceptions regarding school autonomy and cross tabulated to understand the pattern of the responses.

Table-2: Category of Management and Satisfaction Levels – Crosstabulation (SPSS output).

Category of school management		Autonomy in school management				Total
		Not at all needed	No need	Need Partial Autonomy	Need full autonomy	
Public Sector	Count	23	32	28	34	117
	Expected Count	21.2	27.4	27.4	41.1	117.0
	% within school management	19.7%	27.4%	23.9%	29.1%	100.0%
	% of Total	12.2%	17.0%	14.9%	18.1%	62.2%
Aided	Count	8	6	4	8	26
	Expected Count	4.7	6.1	6.1	9.1	26.0
	% within school management	30.8%	23.1%	15.4%	30.8%	100.0%
	% of Total	4.3%	3.2%	2.1%	4.3%	13.8%
Unaided	Count	3	6	12	24	45
	Expected Count	8.1	10.5	10.5	15.8	45.0
	% within school management	6.7%	13.3%	26.7%	53.3%	100.0%
	% of Total	1.6%	3.2%	6.4%	12.8%	23.9%
Total	Count	34	44	44	66	188
	Expected Count	34.0	44.0	44.0	66.0	188.0
	% within school management	18.1%	23.4%	23.4%	35.1%	100.0%
	% of Total	18.1%	23.4%	23.4%	35.1%	100.0%

Table-3: Chi-Square Test Results (SPSS Output).

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.996	6	.020
N of Valid Cases	188		

The differences of perception regarding the need for instituting an autonomy framework in school management among the three major types of school managements are evident from the cross tabulation (Table-2). About 53% of the heads of public sector schools demand for autonomy either full or partial with 30% of them voice for full autonomy while the remaining 47% were reluctant to the demand and 20% of them strongly oppose the idea. Among the aided respondents 54% oppose and 46% support the demand for autonomy in school management. The strong voice comes from the unaided managements as 80% of them demand for autonomy of which 53% were for full autonomy. However, the overall responses of the total sample show a positive inclination

for the demand as about 58% expressed the need. The public sector and aided schools fall in line with the group average tend where as the responses of the unaided schools clearly established the case for autonomy in school management. Thus, a clear division of preferences appear among the public funded and private unaided schools.

The Chi square test results indicate a strong relationship between the type of school management and their preference for autonomy. A statistically significant x^2 value of 14.996 with the p value of 0.020 (Table-3) provides evidence that the category of school management matters in expressing the levels of preference for autonomy in school management. Thus the pattern observed from the cross-tabulation of the preferences is strongly supported by the highly significant chi square test results.

Strength of association:

Table-4: Symmetric Measures for strength of association (SPSS Output)

	Value	Approx. Sig.
Cramer's V	.200	.020
N of Valid Cases	188	

Cramer's V is used as post-test tool to determine strength of association after chi-square has determined significance. The statistically significant (p= 0.020) chi-square value (14.996) implies that there is a significant relationship between the two categorical variables – type of school management and preference for autonomy in school management. But it does not say just how significant and important this is. Cramer's V value facilitates this additional information. In the present sample, the Cramer's V value is 0.200 and p =.020 (Table-4) which supports the strength of association. Thus the preferences are statistically strongly associated with the type of school management.

Conclusion

The overall demand for autonomy is considerable even though strong voice emerges from the private unaided schools. At present the authority is rather very much centralized in administrative and financial aspects. Since the private unaided managements are self financing, they enjoy some level of freedom in school management. The policy makers should initiate to strengthen the public sector schools to compete with private schools by considering the demand for autonomy in all aspects of school management.

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