

7-2024

Perception of School Governing Bodies About Decentralisation of School Governance in Eswatini, Swaziland

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Recommended Citation

Alade, Ibiwumi Abiodun and Tshabalala, Goodness X. (2024) "Perception of School Governing Bodies About Decentralisation of School Governance in Eswatini, Swaziland," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62608/2164-1102.1157>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol9/iss2/3>

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors acknowledge the authors of the literature consulted to provide the background and the rationale for this study. Also, the cooperation of all the categories of participants consulted in providing relevant information and data with concrete evidences is very much appreciated .God bless you all for your voluntary participation that added values to this study for educational development

Perception of School Governing Bodies about Decentralisation of School Governance in Eswatini, Swaziland

Goodness X. Tshabalala and Ibiwumi Abiodun Alade

Abstract

The adoption of decentralisation as a reform in the administration of education sector in Eswatini has been a subject of debate due to its attending challenges. This study therefore examined the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland. The qualitative case study is embedded in the interpretative paradigm, and it employed the Subsidiarity Theory (ST) as a framework for understanding the decentralization of school governance in Eswatini. Four research questions guided the study while purposive sampling technique was used to select five school principals from the selected schools who had served as principals for five years and above. Five chairpersons of school governing bodies also participated in the study. Data was generated from participants using semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed through thematic analysis and the findings revealed several challenges encountered by principals in the decentralization of school governance. The challenges include financial management, capacity building, decision-making, and accountability. The findings also revealed growth opportunities for those in leadership positions. The study concludes that since decentralisation offers benefits, it is recommended among others that capacity-building programmes should be prepared for school governing bodies to enable them to effectively execute their roles.

Keywords: decentralisation, governing bodies, leadership, school governance

Introduction and Background

The world over, different administrations often seek for different structures and approaches for the implementation of their policies, all to ensure effective management, increase

the participation of decentralised bodies, and enhance the actualization of the objectives specified in any stated policies. Decentralisation is thus one of the contemporary reforms being embraced by both developed and developing countries of the world, Eswatini inclusive. Decentralisation signifies a shift in power from a central authority to empowered local entities. This movement away from centralized control manifests in various sectors, fundamentally altering decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability structures. The concept extends beyond physical landscapes, permeating diverse realms like governance, business, and education. Through decentralization, local governments can gain influence over policies, budgets, and service delivery, shaping their communities more directly and project the development of the entire society.

Decision-making authority is dispersed across regional offices or individual teams, fostering responsiveness and adaptability. In education sector, schools and communities gain greater autonomy over budgets, curriculum development, and staffing, potentially tailoring education to better serve local needs. Decentralisation has been the key to education planning and reforms pursuing political, administrative, and financial goals. Most education reformers support a decentralized education management system (Bjork & Brrowne-Ferrigno, 2016; Currie-Knight, 2012; Fullan, 2000). However, the condition should be attentive to the core objectives of educational management to improve student learning outcomes (Harris, 2011).

School principals are among important figures in dispensing administrative and financial duties; however, it is not clear how useful it is when principals are given more autonomy (Jogezai et al., 2021). In the first place, it is more important to know whether they feel empowered through the decentralisation introduced in Balochistan province. It needs more exploration of resource management practices at the school level. In previous research, Diem et

al. (2018) evaluated the decentralization initiative from the central office to school-level leadership. It was a window that allowed more extensive school districts to reorganize into small school districts. This decision came because its need had been felt for an extended period. Thus, the long-standing desire was implemented through the decentralisation of education management. The elements of progress through decentralisation in the educational field have created interest among scholars and specialists, particularly as of late in the wake of high-stakes responsibility and the effect of massive-scale educational change programs (Fullan, 2009; Hargreaves, 1997; Harris, 2011; Levin & Fullam, 2008). However, there is a difference in opinions concerning the approaches toward educational management. Some favor a highly centralized management system, whereas others prefer a decentralized approach (Radzi et al., 2011; Yolcu, 2011). An array of research studies (Bjork & BrrowneFerrigno, 2016; Currie-Knight, 2012; Fullan, 2000) suggest a middle way to education management that is neither strictly centralized nor purely decentralized. Irrespective of the differences in opinion, it is established that decentralization of education has a prominent role in effective educational management aiming to attain students learning outcomes.

Different countries employ different decentralisation models in education (World Bank, 2004). For instance, Australia employs a federated system, granting significant autonomy to individual states and territories in education matters. School governance falls primarily under state jurisdiction, leading to diverse models across the country. Structures of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) vary but typically involve parent representatives, teachers, and community members. SGBs in this country often hold power over budgets, staffing, curriculum development, and school policies. Studies reveal both positive and negative experiences. Structures of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) appreciate increased autonomy but express

concerns about resource allocation, teacher shortages, and varying levels of support from state authorities.

India's model is multi-layered, involving Panchayati Raj institutions (local governments) and state-level bodies. School Management Committees (SMCs) comprised of parents, teachers, and community members. The SMCs often handle school infrastructure, budgets, and minor curriculum adjustments. Available literature highlight challenges like inadequate training for SMC members, limited financial autonomy, and political interference. However, positive impacts include increased community engagement and improved infrastructure in resource-scarce areas.

Kenya's decentralisation model involves devolving power to county governments who oversee education within their regions. School Governing Boards (SGBs) in Kenya are comprised of parents, teachers, and community members, who advise school management on various matters. In Kenya, SGBs often have limited decision-making power, primarily focusing on resource mobilization, infrastructure maintenance, and community engagement. Previous studies on the decentralization of education in Kenya point to challenges like inadequate funding, lack of capacity building for SGBs, and unclear roles and responsibilities.

Zimbabwe employs a centralized system with limited devolution to district and school levels. The country uses School Development Committees (SDCs) which is comprised of parents, teachers, and community members, they mainly serve an advisory role. The SDCs have minimal decision-making power, primarily focusing on fundraising and community engagement. Studies reveal frustration with limited autonomy and resource constraints. Positive aspects include enhanced community participation and local ownership in some communities.

Eswatini, like many nations, has been increasingly exploring decentralisation as a potential avenue for improved educational outcomes and community engagement. This involves

shifting decision-making power and responsibilities for school governance from the central government to local stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community members (Dlamini, 2014). The school governing bodies in Eswatini comprise parents and the principal. Noteworthy is that teachers are not represented in the SGBs. While decentralization holds promising opportunities for increased responsiveness to local needs, improved participation, and potentially better resource allocation, it also presents unique challenges in the Eswatini context.

Governance of various sectors has varied levels of implementation across different departments and regions in the country including schools. The decentralization process involves various actors, including government officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Building capacity at the local level, ensuring equity and resource allocation, and balancing local autonomy with national standards are major concerns. Although, the obvious claim is that decentralisation increased community engagement, more responsive education systems, and improved educational outcomes as potential benefits, the arguments about the approaches to decentralization remain unabated among different stakeholders in Eswatini. Hence, this study was conceived.

Theoretical framework

The Subsidiarity Theory (ST) has been used as a lens in interrogating this study. The principle of subsidiarity is a complex, multifaceted concept with historical roots, philosophical underpinnings, and practical applications in various fields, including education. The core of the theory holds that decisions and actions should be taken at the most immediate or local level that is consistent with their effective resolution (Schmidt, 2007). This means power and responsibility are devolved from higher (central) authorities to lower (local) levels. Decisions are made closest

to the issue and those directly affected by it. Lower levels should have the capacity and resources to handle the issue effectively.

Proponents of subsidiarity theory (Schmidt, 2007; Shelton, 2003) argue that decentralisation can increase democracy and citizen participation leading to more responsive and effective solutions to local problems while at the same time fostering innovation and experimentation. Community responsibility and ownership can also be enhanced through decentralisation. However, challenges also exist about this theory including building capacity and competence at lower levels, ensuring equity and preventing disparities between regions or groups, balancing local autonomy with national standards and cohesion, and addressing complex issues that require collaboration across levels. As applied in this study, this theoretical framework will assist in analyzing decentralisation in Eswatini's school governance through the lens of subsidiarity by examining the extent of power and decision-making transferred to local communities and school committees. It will further explore the capacity of these local actors to manage schools, finances, and curriculum development.

Statement of the Problem

Despite ongoing decentralisation efforts in Eswatini's education sector, concerns remain about its effectiveness and potential drawbacks. The current centralized system grapples with issues like school communities often lack sufficient decision-making power, hindering their ability to address specific needs and tailor education to local contexts remain debatable among all and sundry. There is an unequal distribution of resources across schools, and limited fiscal autonomy at the local level can perpetuate inequities and hamper development in under-resourced schools. Building adequate capacity for effective administration and resource management at the local level is crucial for successful decentralization, but gaps in skills and

expertise present challenges. Ensuring transparency and accountability in decentralized systems requires robust mechanisms to hold local entities responsible for outcomes and prevent misuse of resources. Observe that while increased participation is a benefit of decentralisation, ensuring equitable and meaningful representation from diverse community voices remains a challenge. These factors raise concerns about whether decentralization is achieving its intended goals in Eswatini and whether current implementation strategies are optimized for success. It is on this thrust that this study focused on the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland. The specific purposes of the study were to examine:

1. whether decentralisation of school governance has empowered local communities in Eswatini in decision-making processes.
2. the effectiveness of the resources allocated and managed under the decentralised system.
3. the challenges encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system.
4. means of addressing the challenges encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study

1. How has decentralisation of school governance empowered local communities in Eswatini in decision-making processes?

2. How effectively are resources allocated and managed under the decentralised system?
3. What challenges are encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system?
4. How best can these challenges be addressed?

Significance of the study

The study aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of decentralisation in Eswatini's school governance system. The findings might be used to inform policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness and impact of decentralization efforts. The research findings might also contribute to the broader body of knowledge on decentralization in education, with potential benefits for other countries facing similar challenges. The study findings would remain significant by unveiling information from educational managers and school governing bodies' chairpersons since studies are meagre on the managerial aspect of school decentralisation. The findings of this study might inform policymakers and academia about the outcomes of decentralisation from the perspectives of effective educational management. This study might help in identifying the effectiveness of decentralization, paving ways to strengthen government decisions to further educational management and administration reforms. The implications of this study might inform policy actors in the reform initiatives toward education management. Most importantly, the findings of this study might add to the current literature on decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini and in other contexts.

Methodology

Research paradigm

The interpretive paradigm was followed in this research. According to this paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed, and researchers attempt to understand phenomena by getting the meanings assigned by participants to the particular phenomena (Neuman, 2014). Since the information comes directly from the participants, it has been argued that the knowledge produced can be justified as true compared with other approaches (Sandberg, 2018). This approach advocates for the use of a variety of sources, data, and analysis methods in research to produce valid findings (Henning, Rensburg, & Smith 2013). These authors further stated that different views are taken into consideration in this paradigm since they are considered to help make meaning of the world. In this research, information was collected by obtaining data based on interactions with participants. From their beliefs, views, and reasons, the researchers were in a better position to make sense of the information from the participants in respect of their perceptions about decentralization fostered in this study.

Research approach

Qualitative research was used in this study. This method allows data to be collected in the natural settings of social actions (Henning, Ransburg, Smith, 2004). Thus, participants were visited in their schools for data generation. Using the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to go into the field with an open mind to obtain valuable information on decentralization. This gave the study the potential to produce comprehensive findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). In qualitative research, the context is deemed important as it influences behaviour and acts as a set of parameters with which the individual interacts and give relevant information to research focus.

Research design

A case study design was used because it allows for a selected case with a sample that is representative of the population to be used (Neuman, 2014). Logistically, it would have been time-consuming and costly to study the whole population; hence, identifying specific schools made the research more feasible. A case study has identifiable boundaries (Henning, 2013). In this case, the study was only done with purposively selected school governing bodies. From the school governing bodies, only principals and chairpersons participated in the study.

Sampling and sampling techniques

For this study, purposeful sampling was used. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2016), purposeful sampling chooses samples that are likely to have rich knowledge and information on the topic under investigation. In this case, this type of sampling helped the researchers choose participants who were in a position to give information relating to decentralisation in school governance. The participants chosen were relevant and knowledgeable about the topic under study. The criteria included participants with at least five years of experience as education managers. By engaging participants who were knowledgeable about the topic, the researchers had the opportunity to produce trustworthy findings.

Research Instrument: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to collect the data. Principals and chairpersons from the selected schools were interviewed. The interviews took place after school to avoid disrupting school activities. The use of interviews was preferred in this research because interviews are flexible and can be used with even illiterate participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). Vague responses were given, and participants were probed further to clarify what they meant. Non-verbal responses and reactions were noted during the

interviews and were used in data analysis (Neuman, 2014). The researcher took down field notes during interviews. These notes helped to record information that was not verbalized but that was relevant to the topic. Field notes also helped the researchers remember valuable information and later used in data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through coding and categorizing. Data were divided into small units of meanings, which were systematically named according to the meanings the researchers assigned them (Neuman, 2014). Codes were designed for each question on the interview sheet. These groups of codes were then grouped according to similar meanings to form categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). Each category was therefore made up of codes with the same or similar meanings. Categories were further analyzed and put into patterns called themes. A theme is an explanation of the findings of the research derived from the categories that were created. Some information from the field notes was a reflection made in the field during data collection. Analysis was done as soon as the data were collected to ensure that the researchers used all the relevant data necessary for the research before forgetting.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure credibility, the researchers made sure that sufficient data were collected. The researchers spent time interacting formally and informally with school governing bodies to gain more insight into decentralisation. Preliminary findings were given to participants to comment on and check if they were in line with the views they gave to the researchers. Participants were also asked to check the correctness of the findings before they were finalized.

Dependability

The researchers ensured that the findings were dependable by asking other experts to check the research interviews to get an accurate report. The data were also verified to check whether they agreed with themes that emerged from the participants' information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

To ensure the confirmability of the research findings, participants were requested to audit the findings to ensure they were a true reflection of what they said (Nassaji, 2020). The researchers made efforts to go into the field with an open mind to strike a balance between what was expected and what was real. This helped to eliminate any form of bias and helped the researchers stick to the purpose of the study. Participants were given more time to speak while the researcher listened to ensure that more information came from them (Nassaji, 2020).

Transferability

Although qualitative data is generally not transferable, rich information and a detailed description of the applicability of decentralization in the management of schools were gathered. This was done to ensure that data could be transferred. Sufficient data can truly reflect the state of decentralization in Eswatini. The researchers made efforts to carefully and thoughtfully interpret the data to make it convincing and transferable. Primary data was also included in the final report to provide enough details for the data to be authentic.

Ethical considerations

To carry out this study, ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry of Education in Eswatini. Participants were given consent forms, and the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to them. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were also explained.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini schools as perceived by School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This section presents the key findings of the study. Drawing upon the insights revealed through the interviews, this section unpacks the narratives of the participants presenting them thematically.

Themes

Financial management

Financial management emerged as a key challenge for school governing bodies under decentralisation. Participants expressed difficulties navigating the complexities of budget allocation and resource management, often citing a lack of expertise and training. They struggled with securing consistent funding, particularly in underprivileged areas where community fundraising proved difficult. Moreover, balancing long-term infrastructure needs with immediate operational expenses posed a constant dilemma, adding pressure to their decision-making process. The pronouncements below are informative in this regard:

Participant 1: *"Managing our budget is tough. We lack expertise and training, and funding isn't always consistent."*

Participant 4: *"Raising additional funds from the community is difficult, especially in underprivileged areas."*

Participant 9: *"Balancing long-term needs with immediate expenses under financial autonomy is a constant struggle."*

These findings highlight the crucial need for capacity building and tailored financial support systems to empower school governing bodies and ensure the effective utilization of resources under decentralised models.

Decision-making

The task of decision-making within decentralised school governance reveals a web of complexities. Reaching consensus amongst governing body members themselves proved challenging, especially when different priorities and perspectives came into play. Participants also alluded to external pressures, feeling obligated to prioritize local authorities' agendas over the specific needs of their school community. Further compounding these difficulties, limited access to accurate data and relevant expertise hampered their ability to make well-informed decisions, potentially putting the quality of education at risk.

Participant 10: *"Reaching consensus within the governing body can be challenging, especially with competing priorities."*

Participant 5: *"We sometimes feel pressure from local authorities to prioritize their agendas over the school's needs."*

Participant 6: *"Limited access to data and expertise makes informed decision-making difficult."*

These findings raise concerns about the need for effective conflict resolution strategies within governing bodies, robust communication channels with external authorities, and accessible resources to enhance data analysis and knowledge sharing, ultimately ensuring collaborative and informed decision-making that caters to the best interests of the school community.

Accountability and transparency

The findings revealed that fostering accountability and transparency within schools proved to be a multifaceted challenge. Concerns regarding the potential misuse of locally managed funds loomed large for some participants, highlighting the need for vigorous mechanisms and clear financial reporting practices. Maintaining accountability extended beyond finances, as participants expressed the delicate nature of holding fellow members, teachers, and

administrators accountable for their actions. This shows the importance of establishing appropriate frameworks and procedures for addressing performance concerns while building a culture of shared responsibility. Additionally, Participant 10's point emphasizes the communication gap that can arise between governing bodies and their communities. Effective communication strategies for conveying decisions and financial information transparently are crucial for building trust and maintaining community engagement under decentralized models. Overall, these findings call for attention to strengthening accountability structures, fostering a culture of shared responsibility, and implementing transparent communication strategies to ensure public trust and the responsible use of resources in decentralized school systems.

Participant 5: *"It's hard to ensure transparency when funds are managed locally, raising concerns about misuse."*

Participant 8: *"Holding ourselves and others accountable, including teachers and administrators, can be delicate. It strains relationships"*

Participant 10: *"Communicating our decisions and finances effectively to the community requires better strategies."*

These findings call for attention to strengthening accountability structures, fostering a culture of shared responsibility, and implementing transparent communication strategies to ensure public trust and the responsible use of resources in decentralised school systems.

Capacity building and support

The call for robust capacity building and support emerged as a recurrent theme.

Participants expressed a strong desire for training and resources to bridge skill gaps in key areas like financial management, leadership, and project management. Participant 1 further emphasized the potential of collaboration and knowledge sharing between governing bodies,

fostering a network of mutual learning and support. Participant 2 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the potential benefit of government-led initiatives like mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring to bolster their capabilities. These findings underscore the crucial role of ongoing support systems in empowering governing bodies to navigate the complexities of decentralised governance effectively. By prioritizing capacity building through comprehensive training, fostering collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programs, policymakers can equip governing bodies with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive under decentralized education models.

Participant 10: *"We need training and resources to develop our skills in areas like finance, leadership, and project management."*

Participant 1: *"Collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst governing bodies in different schools would be immensely helpful."*

Participant 2: *"Government support through mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring could greatly benefit us."*

These findings reveal the crucial need for providing support and empowering governing bodies to navigate the complexities of decentralised governance effectively. By prioritizing capacity building through comprehensive training, fostering collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programmes, policymakers can equip school governing bodies with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive under decentralised education models.

Discussions

The narratives of the School Development Committees (SGBs) paint a picture of decentralisation as a journey troubled with both opportunities and challenges. While offering the

potential for autonomy, responsiveness, and community engagement, it also presents complex hurdles that require careful consideration and strategic solutions.

Financial management: Budgetary woes emerged as a central concern. Participants grappled with limited expertise, inconsistent funding, and the delicate balance between long-term needs and immediate expenses. This highlights the urgent need for capacity building initiatives that equip governing bodies with financial management skills and secure predictable funding streams, particularly in underprivileged areas.

Decision-making: Reaching consensus within governing bodies proved challenging due to competing priorities and external pressures (King, 2018). Limited access to data further hampered informed decision-making. To address this, fostering effective conflict resolution strategies, establishing clear communication channels with external stakeholders, and providing access to relevant data and expertise are crucial steps.

Accountability and transparency: Concerns about potential misuse of funds under local management underscored the need for robust oversight mechanisms and transparent financial reporting practices. Additionally, fostering a culture of shared responsibility across governing bodies, teachers, and administrators requires clear frameworks and procedures for addressing performance concerns. Finally, implementing transparent communication strategies is vital for building trust and maintaining community engagement.

Capacity building and support: The call for training and resources in areas like finance, leadership, and project management resonated strongly. Collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst governing bodies were also seen as valuable tools (Pernia, 2017). Furthermore, government-led initiatives like mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring were viewed as crucial support mechanisms. Prioritizing capacity building through training, fostering

collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programmes are essential for empowering governing bodies to navigate decentralization effectively.

Conclusion

While decentralisation offers benefits, these findings reveal challenges faced by school governing bodies. Addressing these challenges requires an approach that focuses on building financial management skills, nurturing informed decision-making, ensuring accountability and transparency, and providing support through capacity-building initiatives. By working collaboratively and prioritizing the needs of governing bodies, stakeholders can create an environment where decentralisation empowers schools to deliver a quality education that serves the community's unique needs. The study's findings remain significant regarding the decentralisation of educational management in Eswatini by portraying the actual implementation through the perspectives of SGBs and enlightening the related literature. The literature review highlights the potential of decentralization to improve educational outcomes through increased local engagement and responsiveness. However, significant challenges remain in Eswatini related to resource allocation, capacity building, community participation, accountability and effective delivery of services by respective stakeholders of education. .

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

- School governing bodies should be equipped with financial skills to ensure transparent and adequate financial reporting.
- There is a need to develop clear accountability frameworks, implement transparent financial practices, and engage the community in oversight and decision-making.

- Offer training and establish mentorship programmes, and creating knowledge-sharing networks for school governing bodies

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a need for more up-to-date studies analyzing the current state of decentralisation in Eswatini's education system. A deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by diverse communities and schools is crucial for tailoring effective solutions.

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