

Improving Schools in a Context of Decentralization: Findings from Research in West Africa – Benin, Guinea, Mali and Senegal

A. De Grauwe et C. Lugaz (IIEP) ; D. Odushina et M. Moustapha (Bénin) ; D. Baldé (Guinée) ; D. Dougnon (Mali) ; C. Diakhaté (Sénégal)

Discussions on decentralization have increased in complexity in recent years because of the deepened realization that the ‘school’ as an institutional unit is a core actor in ensuring educational quality. A growing number of studies demonstrate that the management of a school, the relationships between the different actors (the head teacher, the teachers and the community) and the school’s own involvement in defining and evaluating its improvement have a profound impact on the quality of education. This ‘autonomization’ of the school in combination with the more traditional forms of decentralization, has led to greater diversity in the policies implemented in different countries. They carry many names: deconcentration, delegation, school-based management, school self-governance, privatization, charter schools and so on. The research reported here investigated what the term ‘decentralization’ meant in the context of schools in four francophone countries of West Africa –Benin, Guinea, Mali and Senegal. The four teams which carried out the research comprised civil servants from the respective ministries of education, professional researchers from a local national institute and an education programme officer from Plan, an international NGO. They examined the functioning of samples of district offices and of samples of schools within these districts.

The research identified three trends in decentralization. One was the increasing responsibility of elected local authorities for administering schools. In Benin, the municipalities have only recently taken over the construction, equipping and maintenance of schools, whereas in Mali they have been operating for more than a decade and are supposed to take charge of education within their boundaries. Senegal has made its municipalities responsible for nine competencies and in principle transfers funds to them from the central government. This form of devolution is least visible in Guinea.

The second was the increasing responsibility of the regional and district education offices: some are allowed a greater say in the use of their budgets and in the nomination of head teachers. Mali had taken the reform furthest so far.

The third trend, less prevalent than the first two, was allowing head teachers somewhat more autonomy in managing the resources available to their schools. They now have a larger role in evaluating the performances of their teachers. Most significant is Benin’s decision in 2001 to transfer funds directly from the central level to the schools. A ‘bottom-up’ development in all four countries has seen head teachers take initiatives of their own. Faced with a lack of teachers, as well as a lack of finance, the heads have taken to recruiting teachers from their local communities and paying them small stipends out of contributions requested from the parents through the Parents-Teachers Associations (PTA) and from other fees.

The trends arose in part from policies of larger administrative reform and, perhaps less desirably, from the incapacity of central governments to finance public education. National governments are at present incapable of ensuring expansion and improvement in the quality of the education service and other actors, by default, are taking over that responsibility.

The research also identified four core themes within which the dynamics of the trends are evolving. The following paragraphs will first report the difficulties that the education systems confronted under each theme, then proceed to describe the measures that the governments have been introducing to deal with them and to make decentralization less of a *de facto* improvisation in the face of a lack of both capacity and resources and more of an effective policy in support of better education.

The first theme concerns the relations between four parties: the education offices, the elected local authorities, the schools and the parents and communities of the students. In the main, the elected local authorities or municipalities play a small role, although there was a range from some which took a fair interest to those which took no interest at all –even in Mali, where municipalities took over responsibilities for schools in the early 1990s. Where they do take a stronger interest, their relationships with the district education offices can be marked as much by conflict as by cooperation. At the root is a clash of legitimacies: education officials refer to their professional legitimacy, while local authorities emphasize their political legitimacy.

At the school level, the relationship between the school and the community was much closer than that between the local education office and the municipality, but was not without problems. The relationship between head teachers and chairpersons of the PTA was especially strong, but unfortunately tended to be exclusive, in that the pair tended not to include other teachers and other members of the PTA in their decision making. On the whole, both teachers and PTA did not question the arrangement, partly because of the generally hierarchical nature of the education system and the composition of the teaching cadres; and partly because many members of the PTA were unschooled and illiterate, did not know in any detail what their functions were supposed to be, and were often selected because of their possible usefulness as, for example, mechanics or plumbers. It has to be said, too, that few members of the PTA seemed to show much interest in the workings of the schools. In an effort to make the schools more accountable to their communities, Mali and Senegal are creating School Management Committees, but what their relationship to the PTA will be has not yet been fully worked out.

Relationships between schools and district education offices were at times not close. Instead, in quite a few cases, there was a *de facto* decentralization, with the head teachers being left to run their schools with only sporadic direction and guidance from the district offices, which did not have the resources to reach out to these schools.

The second theme concerns monitoring the quality of education in the schools. District education offices are supposed to help ensure that the schools do provide education of adequate quality. However, the research confirmed what was already clear to most observers. Many district offices were uncertain of their mandate: they did not know precisely what they were supposed to do. Even if they did know, many of their officers were not really qualified to fulfil their mandate –in Benin, several were teachers who had become unable to continue with teaching in classrooms, but needed to be given some work to do. There was little sense of being able to plan strategically for the development of the education system in their districts. Most actions were either responses to administrative requests from higher up or to emergencies from further down.

Most did not have the resources to undertake their most basic task in maintaining quality, which is to help ensure that teachers teach competently. The ratio of district officers to teachers was often as high as 1: 200, but there was insufficient transport to enable them to visit even a small fraction of them. Further, when the district officers did manage to visit a school, they tended to behave as inspectors and assessors, rather than as supports for better teaching. Few organized workshops to discuss pedagogical quality or assisted schools to evaluate themselves. On the more administrative side, they had few resources to enable them to keep the schools adequately supplied with the materials necessary for quality, i.e. textbooks and other teaching and learning materials.

Such situations meant that monitoring and maintaining quality were *de facto* decentralized to the schools. However, analogous situations prevailed within the schools. Few of the head teachers were well qualified or prepared for their function of monitoring and promoting quality among their teachers. Many had to cope with a corps of teachers, only a minority of whom were trained. The rest were either volunteers or on temporary contracts. Helping them to teach better was scarcely a possibility, as many head teachers had heavy teaching loads

themselves. Textbooks and other learning materials were often in short supply, as was money for purchasing them, maintaining buildings, sports and other school activities.

The third theme was managing financial resources. In each country, money was scarce, but with variations from country to country. What funds were provided by the governments were generally tied to strict budgetary lines. Switching them to areas where the needs were more urgent required permission from higher authorities and obtaining such permission was too time-consuming for most head teachers or district offices to bother. An associated problem was the funds provided did not always reflect the characteristics and needs of the districts and schools. For instance, two districts received identical budgets, though the total primary school enrolment of one was equal only to the sixth grade enrolment of the other. Finally, at the school level the rules governing the use of funds collected by the PTA failed to encourage transparency; rather, they encouraged the monopoly of power by the head teacher, sometimes shared with the PTA chair. Accountability was virtually non-existent.

In brief, the situation was paradoxical. Where autonomy was needed, it was lacking, because of rigid controls that were inefficient and counterproductive. Where control was needed, as in the use of parents' contributions, it was lacking. Resources were scarce, but those that were available were not optimally applied to improving education.

The fourth theme concerned the management of teachers. In nearly all schools, there were four categories of teacher -public servants, employees of the community, temporary contracts and volunteers. The last three were local recruits. This had in some cases the advantage that the person belonged to the community and felt a strong commitment to that community, but there were also disadvantages: recruitment was often based on personal relationships, qualifications tended to be less than standard and performance less than satisfactory. Further, their relatively low salaries and unfavourable terms of service promoted not only dissatisfaction and low morale, but also rapid and continuous turnover. The problems of management facing the head teachers were obviously considerable. Each of the four governments attempted to regulate the situation, but had not the wherewithal to impose its rules. In effect, there was a *de facto* decentralization in the management of a large proportion of the teaching force.

With the teachers who were public servants on relatively favourable terms of service, the head teachers had some influence in terms of performance assessments, but had virtually no control over postings in, transfers out or promotions. Similarly, local communities and PTA had no control over the postings in and out of the head teachers of their schools. These movements were in the hands of the central authorities.

The findings under these four themes suggest that the official centralization of the education systems is relatively ineffectual because of the lack of resources and capacity and that forms of *de facto* decentralization have developed that partially fulfil the vacuum, but do not assure access, equity or quality in the education that the schools actually provide. On the other hand, the research did reveal or confirm a number of positive aspects in all four countries.

First, parents generally show a strong commitment to their children's education. The days when the demand side could be blamed for low enrolments do seem to be at an end. The willingness of parents to contribute to school funds –despite the general lack of accountability among the head teachers and PTA chairpersons- is evidence of that.

Second, all parties in the communities, the PTA, the teaching cadres, district education offices and municipalities shared a strong belief in the value of decentralization as a means to promote better education for the children. All parties were well aware of what decentralization should entail and what the existing weaknesses were. The feeling expressed most was, "If only everybody would play their role fully..."

Third, each of the four countries has launched a number of initiatives to make decentralization less of something that happens for lack of something better and more a means of allowing schools, communities and local authorities to make sure that their children receive an education that is relevant and satisfactory to them. The most notable is the reform of the inspection services. In Mali, the district education offices are now called Pedagogical Animation Centres, with a mandate to offer advice for better teaching, and no longer to inspect. Senegal has followed the example of one district in grouping schools into clusters, with the directors meeting regularly and visiting neighbouring schools to help teachers. In Benin, such clustering in 'pedagogical units' has teachers from neighbouring schools meeting nearly twice a month to discuss pedagogical and other matters. Every district office has a few advisors to support these units.

Perhaps even more encouraging was the fact that several schools and local offices had taken innovative initiatives of their own. Arguably, the lack of support from the central level obliges them to do so, while the absence of a regulatory framework makes room for such initiatives. Nevertheless, the fact that these initiatives occur demonstrates a desire for better education and a willingness not to depend solely on the government. The commitment to education and to decentralization and the occurrence of local initiatives provide fertile ground for the successful implementation of decentralization.

The challenge is to transform these initiatives into national policy and practice. This demands strong and concerted effort on the part of the governments. The research in the four countries indicates the following guides to constructing a sound policy of decentralization:

- All the stakeholders need to grasp fully that decentralization is not an objective, but a strategy to serve the objective of helping educators provide better education. It does not imply abandonment by the state, but only a change of role for the state. Where the state's supervision and support are weak and where its absence is not neutralized by strong local accountability, mismanagement might well be repeated, even multiplied.
- The success of the strategy depends on observing the principle of complementarity, which requires reciprocal support between actors with different roles in a common task: they need to complement each other. The schools which function best are those where there is a good relationship between the community and the teachers and where the PTA assists the head teacher. Complementarity requires of course that all the actors know and are certain of their roles.
- Success depends also on a proper balance between autonomy on the one hand and, on the other, a feasible framework of monitoring, evaluation and accountability. One of the more disappointing findings of the research is that in none of the four countries has much attention been given to monitoring the actions taken at lower levels. The absence of transparency in the local management of resources is probably the clearest expression of the challenges of decentralization.
- Mandates must be linked to resources and assets. If the mandate for parents requires them to provide resources, it should also empower them to require an adequate accounting. If the mandate for head teachers requires them to supervise teachers, it should allow for the time and the training to do so effectively.
- Linking mandates to resources and assets obviously requires education systems to build up the latter, before they lay down the former. The research confirmed and underlined the deficiency of resources –intellectual, administrative, material, financial- in all four systems examined. Introducing forms of decentralization before the resources to support them are to hand may simply undermine their credibility and reinforce the suspicion that decentralization is another name for the abdication of responsibility by the state.
- Flexibility in implementation is required to meet varying conditions and varying capacities satisfactorily.