



**Article History:** Received: 28 January 2020 | Revised: 12 September | Accepted: 26 September 2020

***Theoretical Paper***

# Decentralization of Education in Nepal: A Rein in a Horse Nose



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## Abstract

The main argument of this article is to shed light on the dubious nature of the decentralization policy of education and the 'intention' of the state to recentralize it, in one way or other, despite the widespread clatter of decentralization. By taking policy documents into account, I intend to justify my claim that what the Nepal government calls it, an educational decentralization, is nothing but policy rhetoric and a reign hold tactically at the centre. I claim what the state calls it as an autonomous power of ground-level functionaries to exercise their discretionary in decentralized education system instead is, 'a rein in a horse nose', where jockey (the centre) is 'always' in a commanding position. To expatiate educational decentralization, I employ Weiler's (1990) standpoint and juxtapose his arguments: redistributing power, enhancing efficiency, and improving learning to show that though these arguments are put in favour of decentralization, the same arguments are shown to conflict with powerful forces favouring centralization. I also focus on the context and motivation in which the educational decentralization was carried out to understand the egression of decentralization in education in Nepal. In the final section, I try to analyse the dubious tendency of the state and try to explore, 'why despite prioritizing decentralization in policies, there is a periodicity of higher bodies in the education system'.

**Keywords:** *(De)centralization; Weiler; Authority; Policy; Education Report*

## Introduction

The policy contradiction of education decentralization in Nepal shows the unwillingness of the centre to relinquish power to the lower functionaries despite its claim. This contradictory policy has put a question mark towards the tendency of the state in its intention to

decentralize decisions. This very nature of decentralization has made it 'vulnerable and worn-out', unlike its actual purpose of power (to decision) transfer to lower levels, and one is made to believe that decentralization is 'nothing' but the tactical circumvent of the state or the government to

recentralize the authority in one way or other. The first National Education Commission Report of 1955, which was produced after the end of the century-long Rana regime<sup>1</sup>, is contradictory in nature itself. For instance, the report 'recommends the reorganization of administrative and supervisory policies from the Ministry down to the local managing committee to conform with modern democratic practices, with a large measure of decentralization' and also "...the decentralization of taxing, financing and fiscal control..." (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1956, pp. 220-221). However, the same document also states, "the Ministry of Education of the central government will be the organizing force, will provide leadership and necessary uniformity, will ensure minimum standards, and direct the training of teachers..." (p. 82).

Likewise, the seventh amendment of the Education Act (1971) in the year 2002 (His Majesty's Government of Nepal, 2002) was supposed to pave the way for the greater reform in school education by giving substantial authority to local bodies, School Management Committee (SMC), and civil society. The amendment vested SMCs with executive powers for the improvement

of schools in which the formation of SMCs was also devolved to the parents where they could elect the candidate of their choice in contrast to the previous provision where the District Education Office (DEO) would nominate the SMC Chairpersons. The SMCs, however, remained under the jurisdiction of the District Education Office(r) making it an ever-evolving practice of recentralization. Similarly, the newly promulgated Constitution of Federal Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015) also does not seem to demark the authority for three tiers of government: local, federal, and centre. Though Schedule 8 and Schedule 9 holds local governments responsible for educational matters, obscurity in lack of control of local, federal, and the centre in educational affairs may create confusion in the future.

The main argument of this article is, hence, to shed light on the dubious nature of 'education' decentralization policy and the 'intention' of the state to recentralize it, in one way or other, despite the widespread clatter of decentralization. Thus, the present article is an attempt to examine the so-called decentralized policies and the inherent paradoxes it creates. By taking policy documents into account, I claim

and justify my claims that what the Nepal government calls it, an educational decentralization, is nothing but policy rhetoric and a reign hold tactically at the centre. I claim what the state calls it as an autonomous power of ground-level functionaries to exercise their discretionary in the decentralized education system, instead is, what I call it 'a rein in a horse nose', where jockey (the centre) is always in a commanding position. Thus in this article, I claim the practice of control of authority is subverting the objective(s) of educational decentralization in Nepal, which is otherwise considered as the process of delegating or devolving authority and responsibility concerning the distribution and the use of resources (e.g., finance, human and physical resources) by the central government to local schools (Zajda & Gamage, 2009, p. xv). Since the present article confronts only the policy documents to understand (de)centralization in education, I see it as one of the delimitations of the paper.

Among myriads of definition and explanation of educational decentralization, I take Weiler's (1990) position and juxtapose his arguments with Nepal's policies of education decentralization to understand and

elaborate educational (de)centralization and the contradiction it creates. Though Weiler (1990) draws his analysis from countries like Germany, France, Norway, United States, and occasionally from the Third World countries, I find his arguments relevant in the Nepali context which he puts forth in favour of decentralization as-redistributing power, enhancing efficiency, and improving learning-are shown to conflict with powerful forces favouring centralization.

With the above introductory section, in the subsequent sections, I further expatiate and pose Weiler's theory in the Nepali context, only to find contradictions. The final part of the article is a critical analysis of 'why despite clatter of decentralization, there is a periodicity of higher bodies in the education system'. However, first, I begin with the context and motivation of educational decentralization in Nepal.

## **Context and Motivation of Educational Decentralization**

Decentralization reforms evolve in many different contexts. Political, economic, or a dramatic turnover in

leadership and perceived demand for meaningful change can lead to decentralization reform (Eaton et al., 2010). In the context of Nepal, the initial motivation of educational decentralization has been adopted as part of the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule and also as a means to strengthen the legitimacy of the state throughout the country by the education system. Understanding this initial condition under which decentralization arose is a useful starting point for assessing the most genuine and robust reasons for pursuing it. For instance in Nepal, the end of the autocratic Rana regime and the establishment of democracy in 1951 led to a decentralized education system; the Panchayat period of 1960-1990 tended to legitimize state control through the curriculum, which is often seen as an extreme case of centralization in education (though several decentralization programs were initiated during this period) and the advent of the post-1990 situation and thereafter led to massive reform towards decentralization and privatization in the education sector.

With the realization of the need for national education in the country in the post-democratic scenario of 1951 and

also to ensure that education is not only a *Jageer*<sup>ii</sup> of few people, as it was in the Rana regime, the first-ever committee on education was also formed in the year 1954 as National Education Committee, 1954. This education committee later took the name of National Education Planning Commission in 1955, whose one objective(s) was to adopt the decentralized policy in the education system to ensure access to education to children of all background, caste, class, ethnicity, race, religion and under one uniform national education system. The voice to decentralize the education system, as stated and recommended in the first-ever National Education Planning Commission Report 1955, was consensual and unanimous<sup>iii</sup>. The report believed that decentralizing education would enhance the autonomy of schools and in such a context, schools will use their heightened authority to make schools more relevant to local interests and demands. The context of involving 'locals' into the school education system was to bring them as much as close to schools and to encourage share responsibilities for managing and generating adequate funds for schools and also to evoke their feeling of belongingness towards schools.

After the end of short-lived democracy (1951-61), King Mahendra sacked 'democratically' elected government and introduced a party-less Panchayat system in 1961. The Panchayat government introduced an educational reform in 1971- the National Education Systematic Plan (NESP)- with the aim of strengthening 'national integration' by focusing on unity around a common language, religion and culture, and instilling faith in the Crown through politics, media and the school curriculum (Onta,1996). It was the era when the country experienced a highly centralized and regulated system, and the government took over all the authority of school management from local communities (Khanal, 2013) as the motivation and context of decentralization schemes taken at the period were guided towards producing citizens faithful not only to the country but also to the Crown who would conduct themselves per the Panchayat system (i.e. unitary constitution). Thus, the period can be marked as a period of consummate recentralization.

A changed administrative and political scenario of 1990 in-and-out of Nepal witnessed "marketization, privatization, managerialism, performance measurement, accountability" (Tolofari,

2005, p. 75), participation, etc. in its educational policy. The 1970s to 1990s widespread and sustained reform of public administration, including education around the world gave birth to New Public Management (NPM). Like every other sector, the education sector was also reformed. In this field, the major signs of NPM are the local management of schools along managerial lines, the choice and powers are given to parents and governors, and the greater participation of the neighbouring community in the life of a school (Tolofari, 2005). In Nepal, particularly after the 1990s political change, local management of schools was highly encouraged. On the one hand, it was the period where the community was encouraged to take responsibility for the school; on the other hand, the era also witnessed massive privatization of education.

Whatever the context or motivation, educational decentralization in Nepal tends to carry the seeds of its own 'policy versus practice' paradox from the first-ever National Education Report of 1955. Noteworthy, here is that decentralization in education has been in a vanguard in almost all the policy documents after 1950, but also there is a tension between the decentralization

process, on the one hand and the tendency of the state to assert or reassert centralized control over the educational system on the other (Weiler, 1990).

## **Educational Decentralization: Prevalent Arguments**

As I mentioned earlier, I take Weiler's (1990) theoretical stance for understanding educational (de)centralization. Hence, I focus on three arguments, as he puts forth, in discussing decentralization in educational governance: (a) the "redistribution" argument, which has to do with the sharing of power, (b) the "efficiency" argument, which is geared to enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the educational system through a more efficient deployment and management of resources, and (c) the "cultures of learning" argument, which emphasizes the decentralization of educational content (Weiler, 1990, p. 434). By putting forth these three arguments in discussing decentralization in educational governance, Weiler tries to show that what looks-like decentralization in education on the one hand instead is a 'power' tactically taken back with the other hand. In the final analysis of his article by showing,

'evaluation' (if the state does not find any pretext to centralize, 'evaluation' can be used as an excuse by the state to recentralize authority) which inherently contradicts the notion and practice of decentralization as a genuine delegation of power, he argues, both decentralization and evaluation have to do with the exercise of 'power' (Weiler, 1990). And there is always the possibility that the power that decentralization gives away with one hand, the evaluation may take back with the other, and reconciling the two may well turn out to be an exercise in contradiction (Weiler, 1990).

## **(De)centralization and Redistribution of Authority: Understanding the Nepali Context**

In education, authority is exercised in two ways: through the regulation of (institutional and individual) behaviour and the allocation of resources- human, material, and financial (Weiler, 1990, p. 435). For instance, as Weiler states, it is usually the state that sets standards of qualification for students, the educational institution, teacher's educational personnel at different levels, from entry to exit. The state does it in the form of curricular prescriptions,

examination requirements or certification and accreditation, skill, and competence criteria to regulate authority. Likewise, the state also exercises its authority over the allocation of resources through its budgetary authority needed for financial resources. It is the centre that controls and regulates the supply of duly qualified human resources; material resources such as land, space, equipment, teaching materials.

Reviewing, the 1955 Education report and thereafter, both the state's regulatory and allocative functions tend to be exercised in rather centralized ways. For instance, the 1955 Report of the Nepal National Education Planning Commission recommends the early appointment of a permanent Instructional Materials Commission in the MoE. The Commission at the centre is to direct and control the selection, preparation, production, and distribution of textbooks and other instructional aids.

Though education was recommended to be decentralized in organization, administration, and control; the MoE of the central government was seen as an organizing force to provide leadership and necessary uniformity, to ensure

minimum standards, and direct the training of teachers, thus creating a paradox. Likewise, the report states adequate financing of education, but largely from the local resources. Local managing committees were authorized to levy and collect educational taxes, but it was the central Ministry leadership in setting minimum standards, evaluating supplies and equipment, and providing centralized purchasing and distribution within the financial and professional resources available.

The National Education System Plan of 1971 made some structural adjustment unlike the 'so-called' old structure of Primary from class one to five, Middle from six to eight and High School from nine to ten into Primary (from one to three), Lower Secondary (from four to seven), and Secondary (from eight to ten) (MoE, 1971). Though the authority to design curriculum, educational materials (textbooks, teacher's training), examination system (internal assessment, progress records, making questions, examinations) were under the aegis of central forces. The MoE, at the centre, would prescribe a list of minimum essential educational materials and issue directives; standardization of schools, uniformity

in-school program. The secretary of the Ministry was responsible for education administration (formulation of plan and program, general administration for implementation, technical administration for implementation, evaluation, and control). District Education Office (DEO) was set as the chief instrument of implementation and supervision at the district level with the administrative and supervisory authority for education service, appointment, promotion, transfer, and even the dismissal of teachers along with the provision of physical facilities like school buildings, furniture, and other equipment (MoE, 1971). The state regulatory and allocative functions were exercised in rather centralized ways because of the 'one single centre of policy authority at the national level'.

The changed political scenario of 1990, altered the objective and policy of the National Education System in Nepal. The then fundamental basis of the education system (1971-75), 'thou shall be faithful towards the Crown and the Panchayat System' (no longer seemed valid. This resulted in questioning the validity of education policy in the aftermath of the restoration of democracy in 1990. Thus, with the restoration of democracy in 1990, as

demanding by the time, a new education commission was formed to prepare a national education report which prepared the 1992 Education Report. However, one mustn't forget that the structure of the 1992 Education Commission Report was an inheritance of the preceding Education Commission Report 1971-75. Similar to the 1971 Commission's report of making education free & compulsory, relevant and practical, and producing skilled human resources for the country; democratic principles came as an add-on in the subsequent reports. The objectives of post-1992 education commission reports' have been aligned with the 1990 Constitution and the Directive Principles and Policies of State as guaranteed in the constitution. While going through the first few pages of the 1992 Education Commission's report, it gives a feeling of democratization of education. Words like human rights, democratic norms, and values, social justice, equal right to education, co-existence, modernization of thought and behaviour, decentralization, privatization, sovereignty, etc. sound more revolutionary and radical as compared to the previous report. However, the preceding legacy of central control is also apparent in the subsequent reports.

For instance, the Report of the National Education Commission of 1992 recommends, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) as a primary agent to amend the existing curriculum to evolve and enforce a national curriculum. To curb the control of school or community in applying its curriculum, first, it had to conform to the national aims and objectives, and second, it had to be approved by the MoEC, His Majesty's Government. Along with this, the MoEC was recommended to monitor and reinforce teaching activities, teacher training<sup>iv</sup>, train manpower as required, review and refine curricula and text-books from time to time, policymaking, evaluation, etc. The implementation of programs was entrusted to the regional and district offices but not the schools in particular (MoE, 1992).

The breakthrough in decentralization came in 1999 with the Local-Self Governance Act (LSGA) which added fuel to the concept of decentralization 'intending to devolve centrally controlled authorities to the locally elected government, the Village Development Committees (VDCs) and the Municipalities' for the management of local public affairs including education. The Act saw VDC as key

development and service delivery agency at the village level. Following the concept of 'district government', the Act has envisaged the District Development Committee (DDC), a district-level political body, as an apex body in district development. Contrary to such provision, efforts toward decentralization have taken the form of administrative decentralization and the policy or program documents in education have emphasized that direction, emphasizing the need for strengthening the district education offices (MoE, 1997). Since the local bodies themselves have not known or practised anything other than central control of programs, resources, and personnel (Parajuli, 2007), this I argue had put educational control (in)advertently to DEO/DoE/MoE.

The Education Act (Seventh Amendment, 2002), which was supposed to give substantial authority to local bodies, SMCs, and civil society do not seem to do so. DEO or the government seem to control schools, as very little room was given for the local stakeholders to exercise their authority. One breakthrough came as the membership and the formation of SMCs through this Act though. Unlike the previous system where DEO would

form the SMCs, the act had made provision for parents to elect the Chairperson and some other members. The point to note here is that DDC and VDCs were set as the transit points for the release of funds for schools which illustrates the government intends to control the educational processes at the local level by undermining the roles of elected political bodies like DDC and VDC (Parajuli, 2007). Parajuli further states, these are people's representative bodies and appointed committees like DEC (District Education Committee) and VEC (Village Education Committee) cannot take their place. These committees will always remain under government control.

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007), was supposed to support decentralization following the Local Self Governance Act (1999) that had envisioned community-based management of schools, the system of managing, implementing, supervising, monitoring, and evaluating education at the local level during the Plan period (His Majesty Government, 2002). The Plan envisaged empowering SMCs to undertake the responsibility of school management at the local level. However, the District Education Office (DEO), under the guidance of the

Ministry of Education and Sports, was entrusted with the responsibility of managing school education (class 1-12) (HMG, 2002). The regional directorates were supposed to assign with the responsibility of plan formulation, monitoring, evaluation, and examination. The DEOs were held fully responsible for implementing educational programs. Thus, one can argue that Weiler 'redistributive model', which he terms as 'a tradition of centralized governance', is a top-down distribution of power where the 'reign' is held at the centre in one-way-or-other.

Since Nepal is practising a Federal structure under the newly promulgated Constitution, the newly promulgated Constitution of Nepal (2015) also does not seem to demark the educational rights of local bodies. Though Schedule 8 and Schedule 9 holds local governments responsible for educational matters, however, due to lack of specific authority of control of local, state, and the centre, it may create confusion among policymakers and implementers, and in the long run, there seems to be every chance of federal or province government capturing the decision-making rights in educational matters which otherwise is envisioned as the authority of local bodies. Hence,

even in the federal structure, it is 'likely' that with multiple centres the decentralization policy 'may' have the same kind of centripetal dynamics.

### **Efficiency Argument: A Cumbersome Practice**

The rationale behind educational decentralization is that it yields considerable efficiencies in the management of educational systems. This claim involves two sets of expectations: (a) that greater decentralization will mobilize and generate resources that are not available under more centralized conditions and (b) that decentralization systems can utilize available resources more efficiently (World Bank, 1988, as cited in Weiler, 1990, p. 437). Weiler argues this expectation has to do with the 'possibility of bringing untapped local and private resources into the overall resource pool available to education' and 'how resources are raised' and more with 'how they are used'. The first expectation, in decentralized systems of educational governance local community along with societal institutions and group, are expected to contribute resources. This, in turn, is expected to express a strong sense of commitment to the overall educational

enterprise by adding resources for school construction and maintenance, teacher salaries, etc. The second expectation is the claim that in the long term, decentralized systems of governance will use available resources more wisely and efficiently. This is based on the assumption that 'decentralization will increase familiarity with local conditions and needs. This, in turn, will lead to a better match between demand and supply, resulting in more economical utilization of resources.

However, if we look into Nepal's (de)centralized educational policy, after the restoration of democracy in 1990, it has mostly been donor-driven. The prominent feature of the educational policy debate is largely under the influence of donor assistance, the World Bank in particular. The Basic and Primary Education Project<sup>v</sup> - I (BPEP) (1992-97) and BPEP- II (1997-2002), the Community Owned Primary Education Program (COPE) (2002), and the Community School Support Project (CSSP)<sup>vi</sup> (2003-07) were an initiative to transfer the management of public primary schools to the local communities. The BPEP I-II is one of the major attempts of the government which saw the shift of ownership of

public schools towards the community in the name of decentralizing education. These shifts included decentralizing budget and authority, providing a block grant to schools, and improving the capacity of school and community to manage its school (MoE, 2002, as cited in Bhatta, 2009, p. 164). Likewise, COPE, funded by UNDP, was an attempt to evolve a locally based schooling system in which local communities and parents, together with local governing institutions -namely the District Development Committees (DDCs) and the Village Development Committees (VDCs) - take ownership and responsibility for their children's education. Similarly, CSSP, the World Bank-funded project, was an initiative to transfer the management of public primary schools to the local communities.

However, several empirical studies (Research Center for Education Innovation and Development [CERID], 2004; Pokhrel, 2003; Bhatta, 2009) have noted that decentralized planning under BPEP has remained fund-driven and completely guided by central formats. These studies have also highlighted central grip in educational affairs mainly because of the lack of institutionalization of the initiatives and

also because of the lack of capacity building exercise at the lower level, 'the experience of transferring schools to the community was considered a setback' (CERID, 2009). The transfer of ownership of schools to the local community did not yield many fruits in meeting the state's goal of improving the governance of schools; instead, it provided an opportunity for local elites to capture or 'play with the rules of the game' of school governance. Likewise, the COPE mid-term evaluation report stated that 'decentralization may place the greatest burden on communities with the least access to resources'. The report also stated that the COPE does not necessarily provide a model for the difficult task of moving to local ownership of the *existing* schools.

Since the efficiency argument is geared to enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the educational system through a more efficient deployment and management of resources at the lower level, it seems a cumbersome experience in the Nepali context giving every chance to the centre to poke its nose in schools' governance agenda. For instance, the BEPE was carried out through three organizational layers; namely, Policy Formulation and Coordination Committee (PFCC) at the highest level

to provide policy guidance and ensure effective project implementation, (b) the Project Implementation Unit (PIU) at the central level, including several functional units, and (c) the District Education which is the existing administrative machinery of the MoE, to act as the implementing officer (MoE, 1997, p. 150). The schools, in particular, were not given adequate authority either labelling 'unsatisfactory' or 'inadequate skills and interests'.

### **Cultures of Learning: Obscure in Nature**

Weiler's third argument emphasizes the decentralization of educational content and argues that decentralization "can provide greater sensitivity to local variations" (Bray, 1984, as cited in Weiler, 1990, p. 438). This argument of decentralization has to do with the nature and context of the learning process. Weiler base this argument against 'centralization seeking to produce a mismatch between a student's and school's specific learning environment and centrally defined agenda or curriculum'. Localizing educational efforts to local conditions can better acknowledge local economic activities, knowledge, and understanding of the local region. This

argument is put forth concerning the 'language of instruction in multilingual societies'. Weiler sees this initial instruction of students as providing a more functional bridge between learning at home and learning in school.

The introduction of Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MLE) implementation as Medium of Instruction in Schools of Nepal since 2005 can be put forth as an example here. Research conducted in thirteen community schools of four districts: Dhankutta, Jhapa, Sunsari, and Saptari, showed 'positive attitudes towards MLE and its importance' (Curriculum Department Center, 2014, p. xi). The same report also concluded that students' mother tongues are considerably used at the lower grades, i.e., child development level and grade one', but the stakeholders, particularly for the parents 'it was important for them to have their children taught in English medium'. Concerns were also raised that the MLE program has hampered the interest of the child to develop child ability to adjust with the context of the 21st century, depriving to get the opportunity in the international arena'.

Thus, on the one hand, the importance of culturally specific learning environments and learning media (such as language) is being increasingly recognized; on the other hand, the demands of modern labor markets and communication systems seem to require more generalized and uniform competencies, skills, and certifications at the national and, indeed, international level (Weiler, 1990, p. 439). This linkage between culture and learning tends to get replaced by the linkage between learning and technology. This conflicting claims for a kind of learning that is less geared to the specifics of cultural context and more to the national and international universalities of dealing with modern systems of technology and communication, in another way, gives the central government a strong argument in favour of uniformity of curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy, etc. and invariably to hold reign in its hands.

In reviewing and juxtaposing Weiler's three arguments, in the Nepali context, which advocates greater (de)centralization in educational governance, gives a rather equivocal picture. The first notion of decentralization as redistribution of power seems largely incompatible with

the manifest interests of the state in maintaining effective control and in discharging some of its key functions. The second notion of generating additional resources and proper utilization by bringing the local community into school governance has some potential but looking at the scenario under which the notion is based is rather cumbersome. The third argument is less concerned with local needs and oriented more towards modern systems of technology and communication, in which state 'can' base its argument in favour of centralization, the question remains why there is much 'hue and cry' of educational decentralization policies and reforms if there is a tendency of the state to centralize it. In the following section, I try to answer the above questions.

### **Centralized Decentralization: Dubious Tendency of the State**

From the above sections, it is obvious that the true essence of decentralization, i.e., the devolution of authority to lower bodies is 'almost' not existent in schools. The term 'decentralization' in education, even if it has been pronounced many

fold times in policy documents, I see it only as 'deconcentration and/or delegation', one form of decentralization which involves "the spatial relocation of decision-making; with some administrative responsibility transferred to lower level, as it involves the transfer of tasks and responsibility, but not the authority" (Zajda, 2006, p. 12-13). Hence, to understand this dubious tendency of the state, 'simulating to hold loose with one hand and tighten the grip with another in education', I form two major bases: (a) the desire to legitimize its authority and (b) to manage conflict.

I define 'legitimacy' as the authority that refers to 'power and control' of school. Tracing historical periods of formal schooling in Nepal, it can be broadly divided into three major periods. The first phase from 1951-1970, which can be taken as an indication of decentralization; the second phase 1971-1990, which is marked by consummate recentralization and the third phase 1990 and thereafter, which can be seen as a neo-era of decentralization because of privatization and market orientation. Whichever the period, the State from the first-ever Education Commission Report of 1955 is seen oriented towards legitimizing its authority in education in one way or

another. For instance, the State has adopted a more 'interventionist' approach to control curriculum, supervising, evaluating, quality, etc. in educational activities. The control of school curricula- the issue of defining selecting and implementing curricular content and the use of relevant school-based assessment instruments, in particular, has become an arena for the state/government to exercise their power and control. I see this control of curricula has two important bases. First, the intervention is geared towards serving the 'ideology' whether it be 'political' (as it was during the Panchayat period), and/or 'business' (seen along with the privatization of education) and second the State's tendency to show its presence 'by and in large' in the transitional period as one like of Nepal to confirm its legal jurisdiction. Also, school systems are embodiments of national values; they are seen as a source of political power and the vehicle of exercising power (Fiske, 1996, p. 5). The control of schools is a source of power as it affects important economic and political interests in society. As such, political leaders and bureaucrats seem to be in a power struggle while devising educational policies (Dhakal, 2019). Thus, during the process of

centralization and decentralization, very often a process of recentralization may take place for fear of losing control (Tatto, 1999, as cited in Ka-Ho, 2003, p. 7).

As I have stated earlier, decentralizing educational content can acknowledge local economic activities, knowledge, and understanding of the local region and also at the same time act as a functional bridge between learning, however, in a heterogeneous society like Nepal, to address everybody's interest through education(al) policy can arise a situation of conflict. I argue the conflict becomes more intense when it comes to planning to reform the educational system in some significant ways. Since 'education is closely interwoven with the social fabric, it is supposed to play a key role in allocating social roles and statues, and thus determines sustaining social hierarchies. The education is a principal instrument through which societies transmit their values and norms and inculcate them in successive generations of their citizens' (Weiler, 1990). To mitigate or subdue this kind of conflicting situation, the Nepal government at one hand has embraced MLE, on the other hand, it has legitimized its interest in enforcing mandatory uniformity in subjects like

English, Mathematics, Science. Thus, to mitigate or subdue a conflicting situation, decentralization potentially becomes a very significant strategy. By insulating and diffusing authority within additional layers between the system like those of regional directorates, District Education Office, VDCs, the state is seen as playing an 'in-between' role of 'decentralizing' and 'not decentralizing' at the same time. As Eaton et al. (2010) also state, "many recent episodes of decentralization can be understood as attempts by politicians to end long-standing ethnic and religious conflicts" (p. 28). Thus, because of the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation, the state is 'obliged' to play a dual role of decentralizing on the one hand and controlling from others not to erode its legitimacy.

The lack of trust is another important issue, for the centre is playing a dubious role in educational (de)centralization. The Public Expenditure Tracking System (PETS) survey in the Nepali education sector states, 'validating of school census data by an independent agency and complemented by a system of compliance monitoring (to verify whether schools and students are complying with the eligibility criteria to

receive various benefits such as salary and infrastructure grants, textbooks, and scholarships) (World Bank, 2014). This also pictures that the centre has a 'sneaky' eye in 'educational' activities despite its claim of decentralization. Why the centre has close eyes on the local is also because, as Sardan (1999) have argued that "corruption might flourish in contexts in which there is a plurality of contradictory laws and rules so that corruption can always be justified as a form of negotiation between different types of rules" (as cited in Das, 2015, p. 331). Thus, what I argue from the above analysis that many decentralization reforms are 'paradoxically' initiated from the top by the central authorities, though implementation and accountability are left to the local authorities. The reforms have often led to new central legislation and regulations, and can, in reality, be a strategy for strengthening central power (Tan & Ng, 2007).

## Conclusion

Though the major stand of this paper is to dwell on the interference of State into educational affairs to show 'how and why' there is a State periodicity. However, it would be an unfair and one-sided view not to acknowledge different

decentralization initiatives taken by the State. Even during the Panchayat era (1971-1990), which is referred to as 'a period of nationalism in education with greater state involvement in education, standardization and extreme centralization in educational management, it also became a testimony of several 'administrative' decentralized initiatives. For instance, Administrative Power Decentralization Commission (APDC) of 1962, The Decentralization Plan (1965), District Administration Plan (1975), Integrated Panchayat Development Plan (1978), Decentralization Act (1982), and Decentralization Working Procedure Rules (1984) had formulated an extensive framework for decentralized planning and local governance (Dahal et al., 2001) to create an environment for extending the outreach of government departments to the districts by establishing their respective offices and delivering services to the citizens.

However, because of the regular presence of the State and its agencies in planning, allocating, designing education matters, in whatever pretext, it did not give a genuine feel of ownership to the local community. The real objective behind the government's educational decentralization to ensure

quality control and efficient use of resources is driven within a central framework of monitoring and supervision. The rhetoric of "school initiative" and "participatory decision-making" in schools sounds like mere political gimmicks used to cover a managerial restructuring in which the real motive is reregulation of the control framework in the school sector. The school decentralization in Nepali education, because of the way it is exercised, seems 'a feel-good window dressing, or just another policy fad'.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares that no potential conflict of interest exists.

## Notes

- i. The autocratic Rana regime (1846-1950) ruled the country for 104 years.
- ii. A Jagir, also spelt as Jageer- meaning "place", -gir meaning "keeping, holding") was a type of feudal land grant in South Asia bestowed by a monarch to a feudal superior in recognition of his administrative and/or military service. The word jagir is a distorted form of the more formal Sanskrit term jehagiri. The feudal owner/lord of the Jagir was called Jagirdar or Jageerdar and they also used various other titles, e.g. Raja, Nawab, Chaudhary, Rao, Zaildar, Thakur, Sardar, Mankari, Bhomichar, etc. Sometimes they called their seat (primary place of residence and rule) Thikana, Garh or Gadh, etc.
- iii. To make the report comprehensive and acceptable by all groups and communities, 21 school inspectors were sent with a set of questionnaires from East to West, North to South. And also, to make the report more inclusive and democratic along with school visits, a survey was carried out through different techniques. Post, newspaper, radio etc. were used to collect people's views on education. People were excited to be a part of the survey and proposed various views on what is to be done. The committee members, too, believed that the voice of all citizens should count, so the national survey was carried out before making any suggestions and/or recommendations.
- iv. Teacher training programs were recommended to de-centralized to enable regional units to take them up.
- v. Since BPEP I, donor assistance in education grew immensely. BPEP I was funded (mostly in the form of grant aid but also as loans). The major donors for BPEP-I were IDA, DANIDA, UNICEF. The major donors of BEPE-II were DANIDA, EU, FINIDA, NORAD, JICA, UNICEF, ADB.
- vi. The CSSP extended US\$5 million for the project.

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## Author Biosketch

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**To cite this article:** Hamal, S. (2020). Decentralization of education in Nepal: A rein in a horse nose. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research*, 2(2), 194-215. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v2i2.33060>

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