



Decentralization in Educational Administration: A Comparative Study of Local School Governance in the Philippines and Malaysia

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Abstract: *This comparative study examines the implications of decentralization policies for local school management in the Philippines and Malaysia, with a focus on the administrative setup, school autonomy, and institutional capacity. There were three study objectives, namely (1) to evaluate and compare the scope and nature of decentralization reformation in the two countries, (2) to measure the degree to which local schools are allowed administrative and financial autonomy, and (3) to outline the enabling and constraining factors, that is, institutional capacity, policy clarity, and the accountability mechanism, which determine effectiveness of decentralization. The evaluation is conducted using a qualitative case study approach, based on reviews of national education policies, decentralization structures, evaluation reports, and academic literature on the subject matter. The results also show that both countries claim to pursue the decentralization of governance as a reform; however, their application differs significantly. The Philippines has a system-wide approach implemented through School-Based Management (SBM), but it is plagued by poor institutional capacity, weak implementation, and procedural autonomy over substance at the school level. In comparison, Malaysia employs a differentiated model, whereby the autonomy of nominated Cluster and Trust Schools is increased, accompanied by measures of leadership development and the awarding of performance incentives. Nonetheless, this system has created aspects of systemic inequalities, with many standard schools operating under centralized supervision. Both nations face challenges of policy coherence, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a top-heavy reporting system, which hampers local responsiveness and innovation. Thus, the research suggests that decentralization does not always yield positive results; it must be purposefully enhanced, policies must be brought into order, and monitoring must be participatory. Within the scope of comparative development administration, the results underscore the importance of a flexible yet context-sensitive reform that ensures a balance between independence and assistance on the one hand, and shared accountability across different levels of governance on the other. This paper will contribute to international research on decentralization by shedding light on the circumstances under which school-based autonomy can lead to improved governance, equity, and educational outcomes.*

Keywords: *Development administration, decentralization, school governance, administrative autonomy, comparative education, Philippines, Malaysia*

Introduction

Decentralization in educational administration is one of the major governing concepts in Southeast Asia, aimed at demonstrating the positive impact of responsiveness, quality of schools, and achieving the desired levels of managerial



efficiency. The experiences of the Philippines and Malaysia, two countries with a shared colonial history that have taken different paths to decentralization, can illustrate this point. Formal programs, including School-Based Management (SBM), have attempted to decentralize power to the school level in the Philippines, although the deep-seated centralization inherent in the Department of Education (DepEd) has limited any meaningful autonomy (DepEd, 2021; EDCOM II, 2024). By comparison, in Malaysia, the National Education Blueprint introduced the Cluster School model, which helps develop local brilliance and offers organized management freedom to the involved schools (Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020; Tan, 2020). A critical examination of how each nation perceives subsequent decentralizations, whether through the decentralization of authority, redistribution of funds, or reorganization of accountability systems, is necessary to assess the effects of reform and draw conclusions that can be applied on a regional level (Khilji et al., 2023; Ibrahim, 2024).

The operational outcomes depend on the social, political, and administrative contexts in which the reforms are deployed. The Philippines' System has the characteristics of a centrally driven system wherein regional and division offices act as extensions of DepEd; discretion in the formulation of policies is tightly controlled (EDCOM II, 2024; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022). Although SBM gives schools the theoretical budgeting, hiring, and local planning controls, local decision-making remains constrained by institutional layers with institutionalized processes (Realizing Shared Governance, 2023; Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). Malaysia has implemented a model termed managed decentralization, where high-performing schools in Cluster systems and Responsibility Centres (Pusat Tanggungjawab, PTj) are given financial and pedagogical independence to operate under a regulated framework (Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020; East Asia Forum, 2019). However, this freedom is very selective, with the majority of schools operating within a centralized framework (Malaysia MOE, 2020). A precise examination of these two divergent models will provide insight into how political commitment, institutional culture, and distributive capacity influence decentralized governance in education.

Practical outcomes of decentralization, as highlighted by empirical experience at the country level, underscore the importance of additional mechanisms within a decentralized system, including leadership development, intergovernmental coordination, and resource allocation. In the Philippines, SBM has improved stakeholder engagement and local planning, but its effectiveness in making data-driven decisions is unbalanced, partly due to a lack of capacity provision and ineffective monitoring (DepEd, 2022; Bhatti & McDonald, 2020). Cluster Schools in Malaysia have higher managerial autonomy and experimentation, alongside peer learning; however, the overall effect of the model is low due to the selectivity of the model and unequal capacity building among school clusters (Samad et al., 2019; Tan, 2020). These findings support the statement made by McGinn and Welsh (1999) that decentralization in itself is unlikely to lead to improved service delivery without concurrent capacity building, fair support systems, and accountability systems that integrate autonomy and performance.

To examine the influence of decentralization on local governance, this research employs a qualitative comparative case-study research design. By document analysing policy papers, manuals of governance and reports of Ministry of Education published in the year 2020 to 2024, the research will assess three dimensions, or rather aspects; the first aspect would be the extent of administrative and apportion independence of



schools, second, the systems that support or decline school leadership, and third, the accountability and development of capability at subnational levels. As advised by McGinn and Welsh (1999) and Bhatti and McDonald (2020), the paper evaluates how and to what extent the concept of decentralization can be believed to yield better service delivery and learning outcomes. Finally, the findings can help comparative development administration in general because they explain how policy design, administrative culture, and institutional support intersect in a way that informs the effectiveness of decentralization in Southeast Asia's educational systems.

Objectives of the Study

In making the current comparative inquiry, a study of the effect of decentralization on local school governance in the Philippines and Malaysia is intended, as well as the achievement of the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate and compare both the scope and nature of the decentralization policies of the educational administration systems in the Philippines and Malaysia, especially in the position and management of schools.
2. To comprehend the implementation of administrative and financial autonomy by local schools in both countries, as well as how much decentralization matters with regard to decision-making, leadership, and the management of resources.
3. To determine which enabling and constraining factors lead or do not lead to an effective decentralization to support responsive, efficient school governance (institutional capacity, policy clarity, accountability mechanism, etc.).

Methodology

The study currently being conducted employed a qualitative comparative case study design to investigate the effects of decentralization on local school governance in the Philippines and Malaysia. Comparative case study designs are particularly suitable for studying complex, contextual phenomena, such as education governance, which involves the intersection of administrative, political, and cultural forces (Yin, 2018). With the conceptual isolation of two nation-states sharing regional and historical backgrounds but differing in their paths to decentralization, the research aimed to consider the subtle aspects of policy complexities, implementation cycles, and the practical implications of decentralized administration in education. The selected qualitative methodology enabled the interpretation of a profound, in-depth insight into how the process of decentralization is shaped by institutional rules, leadership, and governance activities at the local level (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Document analysis was the source of the main empirical data. This methodical process involves examining official, institutional, and scholarly literature to identify patterns and themes that can be used to respond to the research problem (Bowen, 2009). This study was facilitated by easy access to policy texts, government reports, school-based governance manuals, decentralization laws, national education blueprints, and third-party evaluation reports from 2020 to 2024. Key documents in the Philippines included the policy issuances of the Department of Education on School-Based Management (DepEd, 2021), the EDCOM II Year One report (2024), and the governance structures of SEAMEO INNOTECH. At the Malaysian level, the research identified and analyzed the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), Cluster School implementation guides, Ministry of Education reports, and the peer-reviewed studies of decentralized school models (Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020; Malaysia MOE, 2020).

Its analytic process conformed to the thematic content analysis system as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and included six steps: familiarization with data, code generation, code searching, theme review, defining themes, and writing up. During initial coding, three dimensions that were identified related to decentralization (1) degrees of administrative and financial autonomy given to the schools, (2) local structures of decision-making and the leadership of the local organizations, and (3) the accountability and capacity building systems. Comparative themes were then drawn between the two countries to identify convergences and divergences in the policies of decentralization on the ground. The themes were triangulated by comparing the results obtained from multiple types of documents and data sources to enhance credibility and minimize bias.

Several measures were taken to establish credibility. The purpose of maintaining credibility was achieved through the selection of sources and verification of official and peer-reviewed materials. The issues of dependability and confirmability were addressed by openly describing the coding process, as well as the decisions and thematic synthesis made to conduct the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, peer debriefing was conducted with education scholars and practitioners to validate the emerging themes and interpretations. Reflexivity was also practiced in the study during the research process, as it aimed to reduce the bias of the researcher involved and maintain neutrality, particularly when making comparisons between the two different education systems within a common Southeast Asian regional context.

Overall, the qualitative comparative case study, based on thorough document analysis, enabled the application of a powerful methodology to explore the complex dynamics of decentralization in educational administration. It enabled a sequential yet adaptive examination of how local school governance operates within the broader administrative systems of the Philippines and Malaysia, yielding results that are both theoretically and practically useful.

Results and Discussions

1. The scope and nature of decentralization policies in the educational administration systems of the Philippines and Malaysia, particularly in relation to school-level governance

A comparison analysis revealed that in both countries (the Philippines and Malaysia), governments have attempted to decentralize education with varying levels of success, but the levels, purposes, and frameworks of implementation differ between the two countries. In the Philippines, the process of decentralization is generally explained through the School-Based Management (SBM) policy, which was established as part of the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) and institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 83, series of 2012. SBM empowers schools to develop School Improvement Plans (SIPs), manage budgetary allocations for Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE), and enhance community involvement in governance (DepEd, 2021; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022). Nevertheless, the practices on the ground have not brought about significant change because autonomy is still constrained by bureaucratic requirements, centralized procurement, and poor fiscal decentralization, which limit real decision-making in schools (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023; EDCOM II, 2024).

Malaysia, on the other hand, has a model of managed decentralization, and the policy of decentralization in Malaysia is implemented only to those performing best, which is



the introduction of Cluster Schools of Excellence and Trust Schools under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (201315). Such schools have more autonomy regarding curriculum enrichment, resource utilization, leadership development, and stakeholder engagement (Malaysia MOE, 2020; Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). The decentralization strategy, however, is more diversified and stratified, based on the school's performance, the capacity of its leadership, and its adherence to the standards at the center. Although such a strategy has led to innovation in certain institutions, most public schools in Malaysia are subject to strict central oversight, particularly in areas such as teacher placement, funding opportunities, and curriculum policy (Tan, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024).

Despite these contrasts, the two nations are characterized by a top-down policy direction, meaning that policies of decentralization are formulated at the central level and implemented locally with minimal grassroots involvement. Similarly, in the Philippines, school heads complain of being burdened with the same responsibilities and lacking sufficient administrative training to fulfill new devolved work (DepEd Planning Service, 2022). Similarly, in Malaysia, Cluster Schools are enjoying performance-based incentives, but transformation has stalled in other schools due to readiness and gatekeeping issues centrally (East Asia Forum, 2019). Therefore, although decentralization in form is a reality, in many cases, it can be achieved by institutional capacity and bureaucratic norms and limits in policy design (Bhatti & McDonald, 2020).

Therefore, there is a partial and uneven decentralization in the two countries. The Philippines operates under School-Based Management (SBM) policies in all its schools, and the community is encouraged to participate in the management of schools. Management is centralized in the sense that operational decisions are not made independently, nor is there much fiscal autonomy. By contrast, Malaysia permits more significant autonomy, with only a small number of institutions receiving the opportunity, resulting in a dual-track mode of governance that benefits already high-capacity schools. Such observations imply that decentralisation, being a strategic goal in both countries, its realisation at the school level is driven by political commitment, provision of leadership support, and the presence of enabling policy instruments, which offer the necessary balance between flexibility and accountability.

According to the comparative results, the policy of decentralization in both the Philippines and Malaysia has been implemented partially, unevenly, and centrally managed, which restricts the real freedom enjoyed by schools. In the Philippines, schools are expected to assume time-consuming responsibilities, including planning, budgeting, and involving all stakeholders, through the School-Based Management (SBM) policy. However, procurement is highly centralized, and the use of identical policy templates and inadequate redistribution of funds can weaken school-based decision-making (DepEd, 2021; EDCOM II, 2024). Consequently, there is a constant danger that school heads will work within the strict limits of the administrative framework, thereby minimizing the desired flexibility of SBM (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). In comparison, the model of decentralization in Malaysia is differentiated and as stratified, as only elite Cluster Schools and Trust Schools are given a relatively high level of autonomy in the system, with most of the public schools having relatively weak central control (Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020; Malaysia MOE, 2020).

This is part of a broader trend of so-called symbolic decentralization, which involves introducing limited reforms through policy rhetoric without providing the necessary institutional support or tools to implement them in the long term (Bhatti & McDonald,



2020). Decentralization in the two countries is largely top-down, with central ministries maintaining control over curriculum standards, teacher staffing, and budgetary ceilings. Furthermore, the lack of capacity on the local level, particularly in remote communities or under-resourced areas, hinders schools' ability to assume actual autonomy (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022; DepEd Planning Service, 2022). School leaders in the Philippines are not typically trained in budget planning and instructional leadership; therefore, it is challenging for them to implement the mandates assigned by School-Based Management (SBM) (EDCOM II, 2024). In Malaysia, a similar situation exists, where most schools not part of the cluster system claim to be marginalized in the innovation process, as they are unable to obtain an equivalent level of independence and support in capacity-building (Tan, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024).

The results also indicate that bureaucratic culture and political commitment are the keys to the success of decentralization. The managed decentralization in Malaysia is less tactical and performance-driven; yet, it exacerbates disparities by centralizing particular resources and autonomy in schools that are already well-endowed in capacity (Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). In the meantime, the Philippines experiences the implementation of universal SBM, which encourages greater inclusivity, but also faces the problems of inhomogeneous implementation and understaffed support processes (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). These two models also have their trade-offs; Malaysia provides increased innovation in some schools under the threat of institutional stratification, whereas in the Philippines, broader coverage of decentralization is provided, but low administrative coherence and local authority weaken its effectiveness.

In brief, the analysis recommends that policy design gaps, capacity constraints, and bureaucratic inertia are limitations to decentralization in both the Philippines and Malaysia. Unless it includes specified training, effective control of resources, and the means of making real decision-making at the school, decentralization has the risk of being a rather formal process, rather than a reform. To be effective, decentralization requires a systemic investment in school leadership development, intergovernmental coordination, and specification of autonomy to the outcome metrics in both cases, which is why it needs to be accompanied by performance-based accountability (Bhatti & McDonald, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024).

Comparative Development Administration Research Findings. The research paper highlights several important implications of studying comparative development administration, particularly in the formulation and implementation of decentralization developments across different governance systems. Both the Philippines and Malaysia indicate that without proper institutional underpinning, decentralization would lead to more rhetoric than action, and strengthen even greater control at the center, in the name of decentralization. The Philippine model, which is broadly based, lacks uniformity of application and is restrictive in providing fiscal independence. On the other hand, the performance-based decentralization in Malaysia has limited effectiveness, as only a few schools receive the benefits and hence fail to reduce inequalities. The mentioned dynamics complement the notion that decentralization in education cannot be declared solely in policies, but also necessitate consistent intergovernmental coordination, capacity-building, local leadership development, and resource allocation. The study reminds development administrators that context-sensitive approaches are needed to recognize local administrative traditions, cultural bureaucracy, and the readiness of local actors to perform devolved duties within the context of international development

projects. It is also indicative that comparative frameworks require evaluation not only of policy design and its implementation dynamics, but also case learning.

2. The administrative and financial autonomy exercised by local schools in both countries and the extent to which decentralization influences decision-making, leadership, and resource management

The analysis revealed significant differences in the application of administrative and financial autonomy in the Philippines and Malaysia at the school level, depending on the degree to which decentralization influences the administration and governance of schools. A policy on School-Based Management (SBM) in the Philippines grants authority to school heads to develop School Improvement Plans (SIPs), conduct consultations with stakeholders, and administer Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) funds (DepEd, 2021; DepEd Planning Service, 2022). Nonetheless, their effective power to reach decisions is reduced due to central instructions, belated provision of funds, and restricted autonomy in major fields of activity, including employment, instructional enhancement, and infrastructural acquisition (EDCOM II, 2024; Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). According to reports from many principals, they are relegated to executive responsibility, even though they have the right to make administrative decisions; however, the division or regional offices still dictate their strategic decisions.

By comparison, schools in Malaysia have greater operational and financial autonomy, with Cluster Schools and Trust Schools being the most decentralized schools in the country. Such schools are empowered to initiate their co-curricular education, involve external collaborators, and engage in school-based financial planning under the framework proposed by the Minister of Education (Malaysia MOE, 2020; Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). The primacy enjoyed by the responsibilities of the budget, professional training programs, and culture-building practices at the school is often left to the discretion of the school principals. The freedom is, however, selective, only to a few schools based on performance, institutional readiness, and geographical location. A vast majority of ordinary state schools remain under centrally governed operations in terms of staffing, finances, and curriculum provision (Tan, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024).

The quality of capacity-building support provided to school heads also influenced the leadership autonomy. SBM implementation training in the Philippines is often haphazard and lacks coherence with the comprehensive managerial tasks that school leaders are expected to undertake (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022). The structure of capacity-building is more systematic in Cluster and Trust Schools in Malaysia, with principals receiving special leadership training; however, this assistance is not always provided to the wider school framework (Malaysia MOE, 2020; Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). This means that at the school level, both nations are still very dependent on individualistic effort, institutional culture and the level of encouragement accorded at the higher level(s) of bureaucracy.

In terms of resource utilization, neither state is in a good position. In the Philippines, MOOE funds are directly distributed to schools; nevertheless, their expenditure is frequently limited by purchasing regulations and strict auditing procedures, which do not encourage innovation (DepEd Planning Service, 2022). Furthermore, the disconnection between resources and real school needs constrains the flexibility of school-level planning. Decentralized schools in Malaysia still operate under a stringent financial management framework, despite having slightly expanded budget flexibility,

particularly when managing enrichment programs or repairing school infrastructure (Tan, 2020). The effect of this limited autonomy is that, although a few schools have the freedom to utilize funds in resourceful ways, most schools are tied to central allocations, resulting in differences in performance levels among schools and maladjustments in educational quality.

These comparative results highlight a recurring trend worldwide: the administrative and financial decentralization of education systems is frequently compromised and uneven, not only under formal policy requirements but also due to institutional culture, leadership capacity, and bureaucratic accountability (Burns & Koser, 2021; Syamsul et al., 2023). Although decentralization reform in the Philippines and Malaysia has ostensibly led to a devolution of responsibilities to school leaders, in practice, autonomy is limited, either through undue central control in the Philippines or stratification based on performance in Malaysia. It can be explained as the larger conflict in global education, specifically in the area of control over local autonomy, where school leaders are expected to behave as managers but do not possess the essential power or backing (OECD, 2020; Duong & Nguyen, 2021).

The Malaysian context, particularly at Cluster and Trust Schools, resembles the pattern of decentralization observed in countries such as Indonesia and Chile, where school-level flexibility is selective and often results in institutional inequalities (Ravindran, 2021; Suryadarma et al., 2020). Although autonomy can also lead to improved innovation and responsiveness to the interests of well-performing schools, the given practice exacerbates the disparity between elite schools and under-resourced government schools, undermining the concept of systemic equity (UNESCO, 2021). Comparison, however, shows that the Philippine uniform decentralization as SBM approach is most similar to what happened in South Africa and Kenya where all the nationwide schools are decentralized at the structural level but not systematically enforced and experience more of symbolic adherence instead of any transformative reform (Nzoka & Orodho, 2021; Van der Merwe & Venter, 2023).

The matter of capacity-building turns out to be an essential facilitator or a limit. As confirmed by international studies, administrative and financial freedom should always be accompanied by extensive training on leadership, mentorship, and effective monitoring schemes to bring significant improvements in schools (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2020; Chapman & Young, 2021). The asymmetry generated by the difference in training (having a very high degree of structure in some schools and a low level of institutionalization in other schools) is found not only in the Philippines but also in Malaysia. This represents the challenge of scaling leadership development fairly in decentralized systems, a challenge that is being felt globally (Pont et al., 2021; World Bank, 2023).

The other area of constraint is resource governance. Globally, decentralized school financing systems, including systems established in Brazil, Ghana, and Pakistan, can encounter difficulties in the ability to match local requirements with the resource investments caused by the sheer rigidity of the budgetary framework, the irregularity of payments, and poor procurement frameworks (Aslam & Rawal, 2022; Ahmad & Shah, 2021; Ganimian, 2020). Similar examples can be found in the context of the Philippines, where direct school funding is granted under stringent rules, preventing innovations from being carried out due to risk-taking and excessive costs. In Malaysia, more stringent financial management, even in decentralized schools, confirms ways of



compliance practices that suffocate local innovativeness, particularly in non-cluster schools (Lee and Chai, 2022). These results again confirm that without autonomy in resource use, the lack of decentralization does not result in effective administration, but rather frustration.

Overall, the discussion supports international data indicating that successful decentralization extends beyond the division of power and involves a systematic framework of leadership support, fiscal flexibility, and the institutionalization of trust (Burns & Köster, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Both the Philippines and Malaysia exhibit partial decentralization, characterized by internal inconsistency, favoring symbolic upheavals rather than systemic change. Unless the mechanisms to develop capacity, carry out equitable distribution of resources, and hold stakeholders accountable to school situations are integrated, decentralization will continue to be a jumbled policy aspiration instead of a viable governance strategy.

Its findings on the issues of administrative and financial autonomy in the Philippines and Malaysia have important implications to comparative development administration, to the effect that not only proper presentation of decentralization as a move of policy shift, about decentralization being as a moving process subject to institutional capacity, political will and a culture of governance. The two examples show that limited or selective decentralization, as applied in the Philippines through widespread yet not Intensive transition, or in Malaysia through narrow but not fair use, generates the superficial reforms that do not facilitate systemic restructuring. To development administrators, this illustrates the point that needs to be brought forward beyond formality and to examine how decentralization actually works in the field, who seems to make decisions, and how resources are mobilized and controlled. It also considers whether the leaders in the schools have been empowered or burdened. It also sheds light on the importance of integrating decentralization into a broader program of developing leadership, fiscal discretion, and stakeholder responsibilities to ensure that autonomy can make a meaningful contribution to improved service delivery and equity in education across diverse country settings.

3. The enabling and constraining factors that affect the effectiveness of decentralization in promoting responsive and efficient school governance

It was found that the success of decentralization in the Philippines and Malaysia is highly dependent on three interlocking aspects: institutional capacity, policy clarity, and accountability mechanisms. These aspects make schools more capable of operating independently, enabling them to make quality decisions and provide quality education; alternatively, they act as barriers to the independent operation of schools, quality decision-making, and the provision of quality education.

In the Philippines, the availability of policy frameworks associated with decentralized school operations, especially through School-Based Management (SBM), is one of the major enabling factors, as it institutionalizes the engagement of stakeholders in schools and school planning, as well as local budgeting (DepEd, 2021; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022). Nevertheless, these policies have a limiting impact (results in weak institutional capacity at the school and division level) in achieving the enabling effect. Numerous school heads face a lack of training in financial management, project implementation, and instructional supervision, among other areas, which discourages them from taking full control over devolved responsibilities (EDCOM II, 2024; DepEd Planning Service, 2022). Moreover, where there are no specific technical



support teams in remote or low-resource areas, this further indicates a disparity in the effectiveness of governance.

Malaysia has clear decentralization programs, such as the Cluster School and Trust School models, which have increased the level of role and responsibility segregation at the school level (Malaysia MOE, 2020; Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). These schools typically benefit from a structured leadership development program and standardized operational processes, which enhance their operational independence and efficiency. Nevertheless, policy clarity may be weak due to discrepancies between the methods in which decentralization is presented and implemented across states and school categories. In non-cluster schools, confusion often arises regarding the boundaries of their power, and decentralization protocols are inconsistently applied by district education officers (Tan, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024).

In each country, accountability frameworks are primarily compliance-based, as opposed to improvement-based. In the Philippines, schools are subject to several levels of bureaucratic reporting, including school budgeting, performance levels, and school improvement plans; however, these reports are often poorly utilized in developing capacity or adaptive planning (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). Accountability systems in Malaysia, particularly in decentralized schools, are more result- and data-centric; however, not all systems are applicable to all state-run schools (Lee & Chai, 2022). In addition, neither of the two countries has effective monitoring mechanisms that involve community members in evaluating school performance and the quality of governance.

Therefore, the success of decentralization in enhancing responsive and efficient school governance depends on clear policies, supportive leadership, and adjustable accountability schemes; inconsistent institutional capacity, disparate practices, and resistance to top-down bureaucratic tendencies hamper it. Take heed that the radicalization reforms run the risk of institutionalizing differences and restricting the changeability of local governance in education unless these structural and systemic problems are resolved.

The results indicate that the success of decentralization in school governance not only depends on the adoption of policies but is also heavily influenced by the process through which institutional capacity, policy clarity, and accountability mechanisms are implemented on the ground. This observation aligns with other international indicators, which suggest that without proper institutional preparedness, decentralization may pose a challenge to administration by increasing rather than enhancing educational responsiveness (Burns & Cerna, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). In the Philippines, despite the School-Based Management (SBM) systems promoting participative nature of governance, school leaders usually experience structural constraints in executing the policies successfully as a result of not receiving administrative education, having little access to technical expertise, and potential bottlenecks (DepEd Planning Service, 2022; EDCOM II, 2024). These results align with those found in Uganda and South Africa, where subnational capacity constraints have hindered the ability to transform decentralization into the capacity to make school-level decisions (Ssekamwa & Male, 2022; Van der Merwe & Venter, 2023).

The model of structured decentralization in Malaysia is represented by the Cluster and Trust School, which provides more autonomy to high-performing schools through strict policy frameworks and leadership training programs (Malaysia MOE, 2020; Samuel & Pe Symaco, 2020). Nevertheless, the efficiency behind this model is limited



by policy inconsistency and the low number of regular public schools involved in the reform ecosystem, which, like the programs of school-based management in Indonesia, leads to institutional inequality (Suryadarma & Rossi, 2023). The difference in the interpretation of the decentralization protocol by state and district authorities highlights the paramountcy of vertical coherence in the governance of education (RincA Justo, 2023). This discrepancy raises uncertainty among school leaders, who typically have to deal with inconsistent directives, as has been the case in Chile and Nigeria, where decentralization systems have not consistently translated policies to lower tiers (Cardenas, 2023; Okeke and Edom, 2022).

The matter is further evidenced by the accountability systems of the two countries, which struggle with the interference of compliance and developmental purposes. The practice of bureaucratic reporting of finances, enrollment, and indicators of school development, as explained in the Philippines, even in cases where financial, enrollment, and school improvement data are abundant, often fails to lead to support and strategic feedback for schools (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2023). This reflects international claims of compliance-related schemes, such as those in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where surveillance focuses on adherence to rules rather than educational growth (Nath & Hossain, 2022; Jamil & Saeed, 2023). By contrast, Malaysia has cultivated a culture of results-oriented accountability against the backdrop of its decentralized schools, which utilize data on their performance to inform further planning and interventions (Lee & Chai, 2022). Nonetheless, failing to conduct community-based assessments and performance appraisals at a larger system level does not enable the transition to democracy and the replacement of top-down control, which has also been reported in Brazil, Kenya, and the United States (Ganimian, 2023; Nzoka & Orodho, 2023; Harris et al., 2022).

One common factor in the two systems is that the real school autonomy will be based on flexibility and support. The nations that have successfully implemented decentralization, including Finland and Estonia, have achieved this by investing in principal training, reducing the number of bureaucratic levels, and integrating community involvement in school governance (Sahlberg & Pietarinen, 2022; OECD, 2023). The Philippines and Malaysia, however, are characterized by uneven and segmented decentralization, which allows autonomy to a few and administrative overloads to many. This necessitates the need to switch to adaptive decentralization, where schools are enabled and empowered, including being given the necessary support and responsibilities for leading educational improvement, rather than relying on technical decentralization (i.e., transferring tasks). In the absence of such consolidation, decentralization in the two settings runs the risk of becoming a ceremonial reform that will not serve as an operational instrument of equity, accountability, and responsiveness in school governance.

After conducting the research, the results have important implications to comparative development administration, in the sense that the impacts of decentralization reforms cannot be evaluated just in the domain of structural policy changes but with practice and how it is played out in its actual situation based on institution capacity, policy coherence and accountability practices. The cases of the Philippines and Malaysia show that decentralization can hardly be a means of responsive and decentralized governance unless there is adequate capacity-building, a clear distinction of authority, and participatory monitoring mechanisms. For development

administrators, this highlights the importance of formulating adaptive and context-sensitive systems that do not prescribe the same policy, but rather focus on locally based implementation, a long-term leadership-building process, and multi-level coordination. Also, comparative components disclose how the partial or stratified models of decentralization (as in the case of the performance-based autonomy in Malaysia) have the potential to increase the inequity of the system unless balanced by comprehensive reform efforts. Such lessons require a sophisticated, evidence-based governance of education that places importance on both policy intentions and institutional preparedness in multicultural administrative contexts.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper discusses and compares the strains of decentralization policies in the Philippines and Malaysia, focusing on the structure and characteristics of education administration in the two nations, with specific attention to school administration governance. Following the findings, it was indicated that the two countries have adopted the decentralization system as a strategic reform; however, the approaches are quite different. The Philippines has a broad-based but centrally managed type of decentralization through School-Based Management (SBM), whereby it has given all schools equal policy mandates; however, they have limited autonomy due to inadequate institutional support and highly centralized decision-making. In Malaysia, conversely, the model of decentralization is stratified and performance-oriented, as only a limited number of Cluster and Trust Schools have significant autonomy, with most remaining under the tight supervision of the central ministry. The results also suggest that decentralization policies should be aligned with implementation structures that provide school leaders with effective authority and autonomy.

The assessment of administrative and financial autonomy further indicated that, although schools in the two countries are responsible for allocating budgets, as well as planning and interacting with stakeholders, their ability to exercise these functions varies significantly. In the Philippines, the downloading of responsibilities without a sufficient training and support framework has resulted in procedural rather than strategic dispensation, especially in deprived provinces. Some schools have been innovative and better governed in Malaysia's decentralization efforts, but the limited extent of reforms still highlights imbalances that persist. Furthermore, the impact of decentralization on leadership and resource management remains asymmetrical due to limitations caused by the inflexibility of financial regulations, the lack of control over decision-making discretion, and poor coordination at the district level. The results highlight the importance of long-term investment in the development of leaders, financial freedom, and customized support mechanisms, so that autonomy can mean something and be as pervasive as possible.

Finally, the study has identified institutional capacity, policy clarity, and the accountability system as the biggest enablers and obstacles to successful decentralization. Fragmentation of policy communication, duplication of mandates, and compliance-centred monitoring systems were identified as impediments to local responsiveness in both situations. Decentralization is thus incomplete without the delegation of powers; however, it must also introduce governance regimes that can operate on a trust-based system, thereby strengthening local actors and promoting the application of equity and adaptive learning. Comparatively, examining the development of this study confirms that decentralization is anything but a universal reform, as it



necessarily needs to be integrated into systems of local capacity, cooperation, and responsibility. It is only when decentralization becomes more than a technical policy instrument that it can be turned into a transformational approach to reinforce education governance.

The use of secondary data and document analysis was also one of the main limitations of this study since it can only provide valuable information about official policies and institutional frameworks, although the lived experiences, informal practices and subtle decision-making procedures which arise when school leaders and administrators have to act outside the institutional framework are not likely to be reflected. There are no primary materials from interview sources, focus groups, or stakeholder surveys at the school and district levels that would limit the insight gained about how decentralization is perceived and is actually taking place on the ground. Additionally, only two countries were the subject of those studies, which narrows the range of possibilities for applying the research to the entire Southeast Asia region or beyond. The internal complexities of the stratified form of decentralization in Malaysia and uneven decentralization in the Philippines may not be fully explained by the analysis and study of documents.

In future studies, it is recommended to employ mixed-methods designs, which will enable the synthesis of policy analysis and empirical research in the field, including case studies, interviews with school leaders, and surveys of district-level officials, to explore the practical operation of decentralization. These comparative studies can be extended to other countries in Southeast Asia or other regions with differing models of decentralization, thereby advancing knowledge about governance changes in education worldwide. There is also a need to conduct further investigations into the long-term effects of decentralization on equity and learning outcomes, especially in disadvantaged communities. An analysis of the combination of digital governance, community participation, and leadership training with decentralization would also provide valuable insights into the policies that policymakers and development administrators can create to enhance the responsiveness and impact of the education system.

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