

CENTRALIZATION/DECENTRALIZATION AND PRIVATIZATION/PUBLICIZATION: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This chapter is written in response to the work of Cummings and Riddell. It notes the major contribution of those authors, but also identifies a need for deeper analysis in some areas. It particularly stresses the need for conceptual clarity and further research in the areas of centralization/decentralization and privatization/publicization.

Introduction

This chapter commences with some comments on Chapter 1, noting some of its valuable contributions as well as some areas of disagreement. Since Chapter 1 is multifaceted, it is not possible in response to cover all parts. The main focus of this chapter is on two interrelated areas: (1) aspects of centralization and decentralization, and (2) issues of privatization and its converse which will be called publicization.

The Cummings and Riddell Framework: Some Overall Comments

Cummings and Riddell have presented an important chapter, which breaks new ground. It is a major feat of comparative education, and also presents valuable theoretical propositions. Some readers will be disappointed that the main temporal focal point is 1975, for a great deal has happened since then. Also, the choice of a single focal point makes it difficult for Cummings and Riddell to explore the dynamics of change. However, the task of bringing together data on 127 education systems is far from minor. Cummings and Riddell are to be congratulated on this achievement.

As might be expected with so great a project, the details are not without flaws. For instance:

- (1) Some parts of Chapter 1 rightly seem to distinguish the education system in England from the systems in other parts of the United Kingdom (i.e., Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), while other parts present the U.K. as if it had a single system.
- (2) Appendix A on which much analysis is based, has several errors of fact and/or interpretation. Some of these will be mentioned below.

However, it would be wrong to dwell on minor points of detail to the exclusion of larger points of substance. The identification of six principal historical models in Table 1.2, and the presentation of 14 major contemporary models (p. 760) creates a valuable structure for further research and analysis. It seems likely that future researchers will introduce refinements and further variations, having been given a new point

of departure by the Cummings and Riddell framework. Concerning the specific focus of this commentary, Cummings and Riddell are to be applauded for raising questions about the fashions of decentralization and privatization, including the rationales on which these fashions are based and their implications in practice.

Centralization vs. Decentralization

Confusion in the Literature

Cummings and Riddell rightly point out that much of the literature on centralization and decentralization presents assertions based on rather limited empirical grounds. One example quoted early in Chapter 1 is a study published by the World Bank* which suggests that:

Greater decentralization, including more leeway for private and community schools, would . . . improve efficiency within schools by encouraging greater competition among them. If competition increases, more educational services would be offered, costs would fall, and parents and students would have a wider choice of schools. Within the school, efficiency would increase with managerial accountability.

This is a highly questionable set of statements, for which the document presents almost no supporting evidence.

The World Bank document also mixes the concepts of decentralization and privatization. Such confusion is similarly apparent in other parts of the literature, and regrettably has been transferred into Cummings and Riddell's paper without sufficient sifting and clarification. For example, Cummings and Riddell quote a paper on decentralization by McGinn and Street (1986) which is a useful contribution to the literature but which fails to define terms clearly. McGinn and Street quote Rondinelli, who has made seminal inputs to the debate on centralization and decentralization within the field of public administration.† Cummings and Riddell pick up this reference and repeat the interpretation. However, the emphasis placed on the literature by McGinn and Street was questionable.

McGinn and Street's cited literature includes not only Rondinelli but also other seminal writers in public administration. Following reference to these writers, McGinn and Street state (p. 471) that:

Centralization or decentralization is used conventionally to refer to the relationship between the government and the individual citizen . . . Decentralization is seen as a process of transferring or "devolving" power and authority from large to small units of governance.

This in itself is mostly acceptable, though one might ask *who* conventionally uses the terms in this way. McGinn and Street cite Maddick, rightly pointing out that his 1963 book is a classic in this area, but seem to overlook the fact that writers on decentralization in the field of public administration (including Rondinelli and Maddick) have been much more concerned with tiers of government than with the roles of individual citizens.

One cannot fault McGinn and Street with their next observation that the smallest unit in the political system "is the individual citizen, the atom of society." However, it is very questionable whether McGinn and Street, continuing the paragraph, could legitimately refer back to the public administration theorists and claim that:

Authors who (implicitly) use this definition [of decentralization] end up with privatization or the doctrine of the free market and the "sovereignty of the individual consumer" as the ultimate in decentralization.

It is far from certain that the authors cited by McGinn and Street would agree that this is an implication of their work. Also, the summary statement by McGinn and Street pays insufficient heed to the complexities of the issue, and to the fact that decentralization means many different things to many different people. Later in their paper (p. 480), McGinn and Street note that in Chile:

The terms "decentralization," "privatization," and "participation" were used frequently and freely. But their various users did not always have the same concepts in mind.

* Cummings and Riddell cite this as if it is an official document. Although it might appear so from the outside, the fine print opposite the contents page states that "The judgements expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank's board of executive directors of the governments that they represent." The fine print indicates the authors to have been George Psacharopoulos, Jee-Peng Tan and Emmanuel Jimenez.

†The specific reference was to Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema (1984). Other seminal works by Rondinelli include Cheema and Rondinelli (1983) and Rondinelli (1981).

It is unfortunate that McGinn and Street, in an otherwise useful paper, themselves fail to clarify the meanings, and that as a result confusion has been perpetuated in the minds of others. Cummings and Riddell seem to have been among them.*

Alternative Meanings of Centralization and Decentralization

When trying to disentangle the many alternative meanings of decentralization, one important initial distinction is between territorial and functional decentralization. Much of Rondinelli's work has been concerned with the former, i.e., with the distribution of powers between different tiers of government. Functional decentralization refers to the dispersal of control over particular activities, and is often a "vertical" rather than "horizontal" form of decentralization. A shift from public to private ownership could be a form of functional decentralization but does not necessarily imply anything about tiers of government. Accordingly, it is possible for an education system to be wholly government-owned, but for the administration of that system to be territorially decentralized. It is also possible for an education system to be fully private, but for its administration to be highly centralized. In some countries the systems of private Catholic schools, for example, have highly centralized administrations.

Within the government framework, moreover, at least three further forms of functional decentralization can be found. First, a government may establish separate ministries for different types of education. For instance, in 1975 the government of the Republic of Benin split the Ministry of Education and Culture into (1) a Ministry for Primary Education, (2) a Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, and (3) a Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports (Yannakopoulos, 1980, p. 18). Second, functional bodies may operate within the authority of a single ministry but still have considerable autonomy. In Singapore, for example, the Institute of Education for many years operated as a branch of the Ministry of Education which trained teachers but had considerable autonomy. Third, the government may "hive off" operations through the formation of parastatal bodies. Such bodies may operate examinations systems, for instance, or produce and market textbooks.

It is also useful to note different types of territorial decentralization. The literature is inconsistent in its use of terms (see, e.g., Rondinelli, 1981, pp. 137-139; Pescador, 1985, pp. 1317-1319; Conyers, 1986, pp. 88-89). However, it is common to distinguish three different forms of territorial decentralization which can be defined as follows:

- (1) *Deconcentration* is the process through which a central authority establishes field units, staffing them with its own officers.
- (2) *Delegation* implies a stronger degree of decisionmaking at the local level. However, powers in a delegated system still basically rest with the central authority, which has chosen to "lend" them to a local one. These powers can easily be withdrawn, without resort to legislative changes.
- (3) *Devolution* is the most extreme form of decentralization. Powers are formally held by local bodies, which do not need to seek approval for their actions. They may choose to inform the center of their decisions, but the role of the center is merely one of collection and exchange of information.

It will be evident that systems can be both centralized and decentralized at the same time. However, this is not simply a matter of the difference between territorial and functional decentralization. It is also a matter of the different elements of particular systems. Cummings and Riddell do note this (p. 29) with reference to the U.S.A. and the U.K., in which some elements of educational administration have been centralized in recent decades while others have been decentralized. They might have added that perception of change depends very much on the viewpoint of the observer. For example, deconcentration, in which officers of a central Ministry of Education are sent from headquarters to the regions, may seem like decentralization when viewed by the center and may indeed make the central authorities more responsive to local needs and demands. However, deconcentration can also be a mechanism for *increasing* central control of the periphery, and so could be interpreted very differently.

* When citing Rondinelli *et al.* (1984) second-hand from McGinn and Street, Cummings and Riddell add further misrepresentation with the implication that in this particular work Rondinelli *et al.* wrote about the specifics of administration of education. In fact the book is about general public administration, and chiefly the hierarchy between national and local governments. This is perhaps a minor point, but underlines both the dangers of quoting sources second-hand and the need for thorough acquaintance with relevant literatures. Rondinelli did turn to education in a book co-authored with Middleton and Verspoor in 1990. Up to that point, however, Rondinelli had been chiefly concerned with other aspects of public administration.

Similar difficulties in interpretation could arise in other contexts. During the 1970s, the government of Papua New Guinea introduced what it called a major process of decentralization to 19 provincial governments (Bray, 1984). However, the shift of power to provincial governments also involved a reduction of the power of local governments. When viewed from the bottom of the system, therefore, the reform was centralizing more than decentralizing.

From these remarks it will be clear that the concepts of centralization and decentralization are complex and slippery. It is rarely possible without argument to place specific administrative systems on a continuum with centralized at one end and decentralized at the other, and attempts to measure the degree of decentralization in particular systems have exposed more difficulties than solutions (Smith, 1979, 1985).

Privatization vs. Publicization

Cummings and Riddell match their initial critique of assertions within the World Bank about decentralization with a critique of other World Bank assertions about privatization. They cite one particular document which states that:

... Relying for some services on non-governmental organizations, both non-profit and for-profit, helps to broaden access to adequate schooling and health care. Private, non-profit providers tend to be smaller and more flexible in their planning and budgeting; the government, constrained by civil service laws and employees unions, is less able to change ineffective programs.

Cummings and Riddell rightly challenge the extent to which this assertion is based on research evidence. For many such assertions, they point out, no empirical support exists at all; and in other cases micro-level studies are cited inappropriately to support macro-level policies. Cummings and Riddell add that many privatization initiatives incur costs in equity and other areas, and that the trade-offs are often given inadequate recognition by the advocates of privatization.

Subsequently, Cummings and Riddell pertinently bring in the work of James (1988), who has distinguished between two different basic patterns of private education. One is of differentiated demand, in which private schools can be found at all levels; and the other is of excess demand, in which private schools are prevalent only at the secondary and tertiary levels. James suggests that the former category is more likely to be found in industrialized countries, and the latter in less developed countries. Cummings and Riddell point out that their own data may permit a refinement of this statement.

Nevertheless, as with centralization and decentralization, difficulties arise over the meanings and measurement of privatization and publicization. While privatization may be taken to mean a shift from government towards private ownership and control, and publicization the opposite, close examination once again reveals many complexities. These have been discussed both in the broad literature on the topic (e.g., Savas, 1977, 1982) and in the more specific literature on education (e.g., James & Levin, 1988; Levy, 1987; Walford, 1989). At one extreme private schools with no government funding or controls may exist, and at the other extreme government schools with full government funding and control may exist. However, between these extremes private institutions may receive varying amounts of public funding and be subject to varying degrees of control; and government institutions may supplement their resources through fees and other means, and may have varying degrees of autonomy. Unfortunately, these shades of circumstance are given insufficient attention by Cummings and Riddell (Chapter 1).

Moreover, views on the relative merits of privatization and publicization depend very much on the starting point. It seems that the World Bank and others recommend at least partial privatization of systems which are currently funded and controlled almost exclusively by the government. However, concerning the opposite extreme in which systems are almost entirely private, analysts are more likely to recommend a degree of publicization in order to regulate and coordinate.

Because of the historical pattern of increased government involvement which Cummings and Riddell identify, the world has few remaining systems at the extreme private end of the spectrum. However, one territory which would repay close attention from this perspective is Macau. For historical and political reasons, until very recently the government of Macau provided schools for only about 10% of the population. The government left schooling of the remainder of the population almost entirely to the private sector, which it did not even monitor, let alone support or regulate (Alves Pinto, 1987; Bray & Hui, 1991). The pattern that developed was far from favorable, and certainly would not match the World Bank's characterization of privatization giving the benefits of efficiency and high quality. As a result, in the late 1980s after centuries

of neglect, the government of Macau commenced a programme of publicization. The perceived merits of privatization or publicization depend very much on the starting point.

Funding and Delivery, or Control?

Cummings and Riddell do recognize some of these complexities, even if not in as great detail as might be desired. To handle the complexities, they propose what they call a comprehensive framework which encompasses both the public and private sectors, and which focuses on two dimensions of alternative educational policy making, namely funding and delivery of schooling.

This particular section of Chapter 1 then rightly points out that other typologies of educational systems have foundered on the dimension of control, "primarily because it can vary along the whole of the spectrum under either private or public schooling or, indeed, centralized or decentralized education." Justifying a focus on funding and delivery rather than control, the paragraph continues:

It is easier to distinguish relatively who delivers education, and indeed who pays for education, than who controls education. Educational institutions generally are expected to keep careful records of their revenues and expenditures: stiff sanctions tend to be imposed for false reporting. The participants in funding can be categorized easily and are limited in number. Thus, funding is a reliable and manageable dimension for a typology . . . Similarly, it is easier to categorize who delivers education — be it the local council, a community group, or the national government — than it is to determine who controls education, given the panoply of regulations which can be utilized for this purpose.

While this may seem to make sense, however, it cannot bear close scrutiny. It is certainly difficult to determine who controls education; but the strategy of focusing on finance and delivery is no solution, for it is control that is the basic issue. The World Bank statements about efficiency, competition and accountability with which Chapter 1 (and also this chapter) commenced are definitely about control. Indeed, Cummings and Riddell themselves bring control into the discussion at frequent points. For example:

International agencies have been particularly vocal in promoting alternative funding of education, and alongside alternative funding, *consideration has also been given to alternative forms of regulation or delivery of educational services . . .* Promotion of alternative funding and control of education in the Third World can be viewed also as the superimposition of theories being experimented with in industrial countries . . . (p. 752; emphasis added.)

And, in Proposition 10:

In the nearby Lowlands, where popular religious commitments were more diversified, national governments first imitated the French example. Ultimately, however, the governments reversed their course, allowing private schools to be established with full subsidies from the state, but *controlled through extensive regulations.* (emphasis added.)

It does occasionally happen that funders provide finance with no strings attached; but the question usually arises sooner or later whether that should be the case. Moreover, it is more common, as Cummings and Riddell themselves state in the paragraph (p. 755) which seeks to justify focus on funding and delivery rather than control, that "those who pay for a particular educational service tend to have considerable influence over its provision." Indeed, one of the arguments which Cummings and Riddell present for government funding to private education is that it gives power to exercise leverage. Thus, while one may certainly recognize that the parameters of funding and delivery are easier to identify and measure than the parameter of control, it is more difficult to agree that Cummings and Riddell's research construct either can or should avoid the thorny issues associated with control.

Numerical Portraits

Difficulties with conceptual matters have also translated themselves into numbers. Table 1.4 in Chapter 1 presents ratios of privatization in the countries covered. The problem is that some countries which have similar frameworks are presented as if they were very different.

This point may be illustrated by extracting some statistics from Appendix A (Chapter 1), which are here presented as Table 7.1. The table commences with figures for Hong Kong which suggest that in 1980, private primary school enrolments comprised 93.4% of the total, and that private secondary school enrolments comprised 72.0%.*

* Cummings and Riddell have a footnote concerning the secondary school figure for Hong Kong: "May be underestimation since public secondary schools not introduced until 1978." At least to this reader, it is not at all clear what this means. Hong Kong has had public secondary schools since the nineteenth century.

Table 7.1
Selected Figures from Cummings and Riddell's Appendix A

Country	Government funding	Control/ support of private ed	Pattern of schooling	% Private enrollments	
				Primary	Secondary
Hong Kong	C	S	P	0.934	0.720*
Ireland	C†	S	P	1.000	0.910‡
Lesotho	C	S	P	1.000	0.890
Papua New Guinea	D	S	M	0.020§	low
Swaziland	C	S	P	0.790	0.790
United Kingdom	D	S	M	0.038	0.100

*Figure from 1980. May be underestimation since public secondary schools not introduced until 1978.

†Although categorized as C, approximately 5% comes from local funding.

‡Figure for 1980.

§Numerical estimate; all schools nationalized in 1967.

||Numerical estimate.

For explanation of codes, see Cummings and Riddell (Chapter 1).

It appears that either Cummings and Riddell themselves, or the author of the source from which the figures were taken, misunderstood the categories. Hong Kong's schools are classified as either government, aided or private. The aided schools are owned by churches and other voluntary bodies. In legal terms they are certainly non-government, but it is doubtful whether they can be called private. They receive almost all their recurrent funding and about 80% of their capital funding from the government, in return for which they acquiesce to strict controls that extend from teachers' qualifications and salaries to the number of toilets and the size of lettering on signboards. As far as the general population and also the Hong Kong government is concerned, the aided schools are part of the public sector (Hong Kong, 1981a, p. 19). The actual figures, shown in Table 7.2, show a very different picture from that portrayed by Cummings and Riddell. The difference is especially marked at the primary level, where the private sector had just 12.5% of enrollments in day schools (14.4% including night schools) rather than the 93.4% indicated by Cummings and Riddell.*

Table 7.2
Enrollments by Level, Hong Kong, 1980 (%)

	Day schools			Day plus night schools		
	Govt Aided	Aided Private	Private Government	Govt Aided	Aided Private	Private Government
Primary	5.8	81.6	12.5	5.7	79.9	14.4
Secondary	6.0	37.4	56.6	6.6	33.3	60.1

Source: Hong Kong (1981b, p. 165).

Similar problems affect the statistics for Ireland, Lesotho and Swaziland. For Ireland, Cummings and Riddell present the figures (for 1980) of 100.0% private at the primary level and 91.0% private at the secondary level. That was again in a nominal sense valid, for the vast majority of schools were (and are) owned by churches. As in Hong Kong, however, the government provided overall supervision, paid teachers' salaries, and controlled the basic curriculum (Elvin, 1981, p. 139). It is thus much more meaningful to consider these church schools part of the public rather than the private sector. Similar observations apply to Lesotho (Maimbolwa-Sinyangwe & Leimu, 1985, p. 2999) and to Swaziland (Cameron, 1983, p. 131). In the latter, 20% of the 1977 enrollment were in government-owned schools, 70% were in aided schools, and only 10% were in "real" private schools.

* One source which Cummings and Riddell (Chapter 1) cite for their Table 1.4 is James (1988). That paper may be one cause of the confusion, for James herself presents a misleading figure. On page 96 she states that in Hong Kong 92% of primary enrollments and 72% of secondary enrollments were in private schools. The source she herself cites is the Hong Kong government's Annual Digest of Statistics (Hong Kong, 1978). While the figure was accurate for secondary schools, it was quite wrong for primary schools. The Annual Digest of Statistics actually gave the figures: 5.2% of pupils in government schools, 78.7% in aided schools and 16.3% in private schools (p. 151).

By contrast, the figures on Papua New Guinea and the United Kingdom, in which similar arrangements operate, seem a more reasonable reflection of reality. In Papua New Guinea a national education system was created in 1970 to combine the work of the government and churches in a pattern comparable to that in Hong Kong, Ireland, Lesotho and Swaziland*; and in the United Kingdom the majority of church schools also receive grants in aid and operate through the public sector (Elvin, 1981, p. 228; Dent, 1982, pp. 36-37).

The question then arising is why Hong Kong, Lesotho, Swaziland and Ireland are treated in one way, while Papua New Guinea and the United Kingdom are treated in another. The answer seems to lie in the failure to get to grips with the different dimensions of privatization and its implications.

Conclusions

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that Cummings and Riddell's chapter is an important contribution to the literature. The thrust here has been to explore further some of the theoretical underpinnings, particularly as they relate to centralization/decentralization and to privatization/publicization. It is unfortunate that in order to show concepts which this author considers to need further refinement, it has been necessary to expose more disagreements than agreements with the work of Cummings and Riddell. To redress part of this imbalance, therefore, it must again be stressed that Cummings and Riddell's chapter is very worthwhile and will help advance enquiry to a new plane of understanding. Especially valuable, but receiving rather little attention in this response, are the six principal historical models and the 14 major contemporary models.

Nevertheless, the point has been made in this chapter that aspects of the model require further refinement before the framework can be considered firm. First, while it is easy to understand the temptation to focus only on funding and delivery rather than control, it has been suggested that this is a spurious distinction. Ironically, Cummings and Riddell seem to recognize that by default, for they do discuss issues of control at certain points. Indeed, one may here refer to their discussion of the Lowlands model. As noted above, in presenting that model, Cummings and Riddell pointed out that ultimately the governments allowed private schools to be established but with full subsidies accompanied by extensive regulations. Cummings and Riddell then observe that:

In such circumstances, it becomes difficult to draw the line between public and private provision and funding.

This seems to be recognition that a major part of the model needs substantial refinement.

It has also been suggested here that in at least some circles discussion on centralization/decentralization is confused, and that that confusion has been carried over into the Cummings and Riddell chapter. Part of the difficulty is within conceptual frameworks for territorial and functional centralization/decentralization. Addition of privatization as a dimension has exacerbated the confusion. In this context, it is instructive to note that one of Rondinelli's early seminal papers (Rondinelli, 1981) defined decentralization to include just deconcentration, delegation and devolution. Three years later (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1984) he added the dimension of privatization. In conceptual terms, however, privatization did not fit at all easily into the 1984 publication. Indeed it was confined to one section under the heading "types of decentralization," and hardly referred to again.

On the matter of centralization and decentralization, therefore, one is left to agree with Winkler (1989, p. 27), who is himself cited approvingly by Cummings and Riddell:

In theory decentralization has the potential to improve both the finance and efficiency of public education, as well as the potential to worsen equity. In reality, we know very little about the effects of decentralization on efficiency and equity. A number of case studies exist describing why decentralization policies were formulated, how they were implemented, why implementation was successful or not, and which groups appeared to win or lose as a result. These studies permit some generalizations about the politics of decentralization but permit almost none about the educational or economic consequences. Given the lack of generalizable results and the lack of a predictive model of the effects of decentralization, advocacy or opposition to decentralization must be based on either theoretical or political grounds.

* Under the 1970 Education Act (Papua New Guinea, 1970), formal ownership of the church schools remained with the churches. However, in the new system the government paid all teachers' salaries and exerted many other controls over curriculum and other matters, so that in effect the church schools had become part of the public system. Only the Seventh-Day Adventist church stayed out of the system, and it had below 3% of enrollments. For the sake of accuracy it should be noted that the national education system was formed in 1970, not 1967 as indicated by Cummings and Riddell. The blueprint for the national education system was the 1969 report of a team led by W. J. Weeden.

A similar statement could be made about privatization/publicization. Cummings and Riddell are right to challenge the way that the World Bank and other agencies reach strong conclusions on a flimsy research base. More research is needed on both conceptual and empirical fronts.

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