
Phenomenological Analysis of the Challenges and Opportunities of Decentralization of High School Curriculum with Emphasis on Multiculturalism and Cultural Heritage

*Zahra Ansari*¹, Parvin Samadi²*

Received Date:03/02/2022

Accepted Date:31/05/2022

Pp: 1-12

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of university professors in relation to the challenges and opportunities of decentralization of curriculum development in high school with an emphasis on multiculturalism and cultural heritage. This qualitative research was performed using phenomenological method. In this study, semi-structured interview method was used. For this purpose, data were collected by interviewing 15 professors (Professors of educational sciences in Tehran universities) who had research and teaching experience in this domain which was analyzed by Streubert and Carpenter (2003) method. The analysis of the interviews identified four main themes, including cultural challenges, social challenges, economical and structural challenges, and 19 sub-themes in the form of opportunities and challenges, including: flexibility, comprehensive participation, rejection of predetermination, focus on the interests of the child, non-prescriptive nature, avoidance of prejudice, practicality, attracting financial participation of the target community, avoidance of wasting resources, loss of bureaucracy, direct communication between developer and learner, risk of rupture cultural, ethnic and cultural hatred, cultural narcissism, risk of community fragmentation, risk of ethnic self-determination, the high cost of resources, the lack of a unified structure, and the confusion of mining.

Key Words: Curriculum, Decentralization, Challenges and Opportunities, Multiculturalism and Culture.

Zahra Ansari
PH.d student in
Curriculum Studies,
Alzahra university,
Tehran, Iran.
Parvin Samadi
Associate
Professor, Department of
Curriculum Studies,
Faculty of Educational
Sciences and
Psychology, AL Zahra
University, Tehran, Iran.
Corresponding Author
zahraansari547@
gmail.com

¹ - PH.d student in Curriculum Studies,. Alzahra university, Tehran, Iran.

² - Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, AL Zahra University, Tehran, Iran.

* Corresponding Author: zahraansari547@gmail.com

Introduction

The issue of decentralization is one of the topics that has been the subject of debate and controversy among education scholars and educational policy-makers throughout the history of education. Educational systems have been constantly struggling with the problem of decentralization, because daily experimental research and theoretical considerations show shortcomings in centralized and decentralized systems (Fathi vajargah, 2016). Education systems in European and American countries have experienced decentralized curriculum development for almost three decades (Fathi vajargah 2016). In any case, centralism in curriculum design is still a traditional and dominant view in this field. Curriculum development in all educational systems, even until the end of the 20th century has been pursued centrally. Curriculum centralism largely rooted in the political, historical, economic, and social contexts of nations, governments, and educational systems. The message of centralized curriculum development is that it is not the job of teachers to develop and expand the curriculum; rather, it is the duty of the government to design, compile and communicate all stages of curriculum (Salsabili, 2011). Anyhow, this view seems to be changing so that decentralization in education in general and in the curriculum in particular in the past decades has

been prominently considered. And politically, there has been a mental preoccupation with decentralization of education among countries around the world (Aghazadeh, 2013). Simultaneously with the wide-ranging of political, economical and social developments and changes, the social demand for participation in educational decisions and the provision of individual and social rights, the need for flexible curricula and education compatible with social, cultural and international change from the second half of the twentieth century has been raised. In this regard, some centralized educational systems have adopted a decentralization tendency to solve their unfavorable situation, and some educational systems have considered the centralism approach as a response to the discussion of educational justice and equal opportunities for education and training (Yarmohammadian, 2014). As mentioned in the above section, one of the necessities of moving towards decentralization is cultural issues. Iran is a multicultural society that needs to pay attention to different cultures moving towards decentralization, and in this way it is important to engage in multicultural education. Multicultural education supports different cultures and intercultural students in a community. This approach supports multicultural education programs, social communication, and democratic school activities (McLaren, 2003). Multiculturalism is a set of ideas about the right way to respond to

cultural and religious differences. Multiculturalism in political contexts encompasses a variety of different meanings, including the promotion of equal respect for cultural differences in society, the promotion of cultural diversity, and the addressing of religious and ethnic groups by powerful individuals (Malik, 2010). Benett (2003) believes that multicultural education is a type of teaching and learning based on cultural pluralism, democratic values and beliefs of a culturally diverse society. Jones (2005) believe that multicultural education is a common term to describe pluralistic education and its proponents are looking for education for all children from preschool to university. Golnik and Chain (2009) consider multicultural education as an educational strategy in which different cultures are used to develop effective education and a useful school environment. Multicultural education supports concepts such as diversity, equality, social justice and democracy in the school environment. Finally, Bank (1999) provides the most comprehensive definition of multicultural education. He considers multicultural education as an idea, educational reform movement and process whose main purpose is to change the structure of educational institutions in such a way that male and female students, students with disabilities, and students who are members of cultural, ethnic, or racial groups have an equal chance of attending school. There are two

main approaches to culture-based education:

Cultural appreciation: As stated in the curriculum documents, cultural appreciation seeks to lead to cultural richness that encourages the elimination of racial judgments. The model of cultural appreciation assumes that individuals' attitudes are at the core of the reproduction of racial judgments. Unfortunately, cultural appreciation programs such as the so-called sensitivity training have had little or no effect on reducing judgment. One possible reason for the program's failure may be to exaggerate ethnic differences and thus contribute to perpetuating ethnic and racial stereotypes. (McCarthy, 1990). Models of cultural appreciation also stem from the failure of cultural understanding programs. Multiculturalism curriculum theorists such as Bond (2006) argue that students must demonstrate competence in the language and cultural practices of other groups in order to become exclusive or primary members of these groups. The purpose of cultural appreciation models is to support ethnic and bilingual studies to protect cultural diversity. Unlike the cultural perception model, which focuses on white students as the main audience, the cultural appreciation model focuses on minority students. In this model, the focus of curriculum planners is on the mainstream. Minority students must balance their identity and ethnicity with the mainstream of society. The cultural appreciation model operates in an affirmative manner. This model

supports the efforts of minorities to gain competence in the world of the majority, as it causes the decline of minorities, and in doing so submits minority adolescents to the absorption and integration of the majority. (McCarthy, 1990).

Cultural freedom: The model of cultural freedom is like the model of cultural appreciation that confirms the identity of minorities. The model of cultural freedom emphasizes the positive value of self-concept for minority students by studying the history and culture of minorities. Improving academic achievement should enable minority adolescents to succeed in the job market. Proponents of the cultural freedom model argue that profound changes in economics and society are due to improved academic achievement. McCarthy (1993) Believes any approach offers a different and precise flexibility as to what should be done about racial inequality in education. Proponents of cultural appreciation advocate for sensitivity and appreciation of cultural differences. Proponents of cultural competence emphasize the protection of minorities' identities and language, and the creation of bridges between minorities and the mainstream of culture. (McCarthy, 1993).

In any case, it seems that apart from the definition of culture-based education, to achieving such a goal requires a transition from centralized education to decentralized education. This transition is associated with challenges and opportunities that

shapes the main concern of the present study.

Research question

What are the challenges and opportunities of decentralization of high school curriculum with an emphasis on multiculturalism and cultural heritage?

Methodology

The present research has been done in a qualitative and phenomenological (descriptive) way. The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe life experiences as they are in life. Streubert and Carpenter (2003) consider phenomenology as a practice that aims to describe special phenomena or appearance of things and life experiences. The focus of phenomenology is life experiences, because these experiences make the meaning of each phenomenon for the person and tell the person what is real (Adib Haj Bagheri, Parvizi, Salsali, 2011), and because the phenomenological method tries to describe human experiences in context in which it occurs provides the richest and most descriptive information, so the use of this method is suitable for elucidating and describing the phenomenon in more depth. The number of research samples was 15 faculty members (Professors of educational sciences in Tehran universities) who were interviewed out of every 15 cases. Research participants were selected based on purposive sampling and snowball method. Professors subject to this approach were teaching in the field

of higher education. Participants in this study were selected and

interviewed with the characteristics presented in Table (1).

Table 1- Profile of the interviewees

Number	Job	degree	Sex
1	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
2	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
3	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
4	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
5	University faculty	Ph.D.	Female
6	University faculty	Ph.D.	Female
7	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
8	University faculty	Ph.D.	Female
9	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
10	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
11	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
12	University faculty	Ph.D.	Female
13	University faculty	Ph.D.	Female
14	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male
15	University faculty	Ph.D.	Male

The number of samples was determined based on the researcher's information saturation; That is, the number of interviews went so far that the researcher's information in the field of research was saturated and then no other information was added. In the discussion of assessing the validity of the research, the interview questions were modified and approved by 4 professors in the relevant field after they were designed. To record the interviews, all conversations were recorded audio. The recorded interviews were then carefully listened to by the researcher himself and written word by word. After the recorded interviews were written, the "members' check" method was used to confirm the validity of the interviews. Thus, the written text of the interviews was sent again to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the content and to

correct the content if necessary. Data analysis was performed by Strabert and Carpenter (2003). The method includes description of the phenomenon by the researcher, discarding the researcher's assumptions, interviewing participants, reading participants' descriptions, extracting essences, finding basic relationships, writing a description of the phenomenon, returning this description to the participants and obtaining their approval and finally reviewing the relevant texts and published findings (Adib Haj Bagheri, Parvizi, Salsali, 2011).

Research Findings

After conducting a total of 15 interviews with professors who had good experience in the field and studied them several times, four main topics and 19 sub-topics in the form of opportunities and challenges were found including:

flexibility, comprehensive participation, rejection of predetermination, focus on the interests of the child, non-prescriptive nature, avoidance of prejudice, practicality, attracting financial participation of the target community, avoidance of wasting resources, loss of bureaucracy, direct communication between developer and learner, risk of cultural rupture, ethnic and cultural hatred, cultural narcissism, risk of community fragmentation, risk of ethnic self-determination, the high cost of resources, the lack of a unified structure, and the confusion of mining.

Table 2: Main and sub-themes extracted from the interviews

Main themes	Sub-themes of opportunities	Sub-themes Challenges
Cultural	flexibility Comprehensive participation Rejection of preset	Danger of cultural rupture Ethnic and cultural hatred Cultural narcissism
Social	Focus on children's interests The nature of non-prescription Avoid prejudice Usability	Danger of community fragmentation The danger of ethnic self-determination
Economical	Attract financial participation of the target community Avoid wasting resources	High cost for compiling resources
Structural	Loss of bureaucracy Direct communication between planner and learner	Lack of a single structure Chaos and anarchism

Theme 1: Cultural

Opportunities:

Flexibility: Paying attention to the decentralized approach in high school with an emphasis on culture leads to a kind of flexibility in accepting ethnicities and cultures in the curriculum, one of the participants in this regard states that:

The basis and nature of the decentralized approach is that nothing is absolute, I think this approach has somehow broken the dictatorship in the curriculum for the acceptance of others (Participant No. 2).

Participation: participation of all stakeholders in the development of the curriculum was one of the items that many people interviewed emphasized. In this regard, one of the participant's states that:

We do not set a goal in this type of curriculum alone, everyone for whom this curriculum is developed must participate, from parents to students and (Participant No. 4).

Pre-determined rejection: The rejection of the linear nature of routine curricula and the rejection of pre-determined items were also among the issues that the

participants in the study emphasized extensively. One of the participants in this regard states that:

In this approach, nothing is predetermined at all, as its name implies, everything appears in proportion, and it is not the case that you have a predetermined item (participant 8).

Challenges

Risk of cultural rupture: Given the nature of decentralized curriculum planning, attention to all dimensions and stakeholders, it is possible that cultural rupture occurs with the emergence of a particular culture and heritage. One of the participants in this regard states that:

When you want to have a decentralized curriculum and pay attention to all cultures in it, you may inadvertently and unknowingly highlight a particular culture, and this will lead to the separation of cultures (Participant No. 3).

Cultural and ethnic hatred: The negative reaction of different cultures to each other is one of the issues that many people have mentioned. One of the interviewees states that:

Suppose we have developed a curriculum with a decentralized approach with an emphasis on culture. Well, we have to put symbols of all cultures in this curriculum. Sometimes these symbols are misinterpreted and cause cultural and ethnic hatred of each other (Participant No. 14).

Cultural narcissism: One of the issues that many people in the

present study have mentioned is the issue of cultural narcissism. One participant in this regard states that:

As you know, some ethnicities and cultures claim to be superior to others. How can you prevent this narcissism if we want to allow everyone to develop their own curriculum with an emphasis on cultural heritage with a decentralized approach (Participant No. 6).

Theme 2: social

Opportunities:

Focus on learner interests: One of the important features of decentralized curriculum is the emphasis on focusing on learner interests in content. One participant in this regard states that:

In this curriculum, our focus is on the learner's interest, it is the learner's interest that drives the content, not the other way around. (Participant No. 1).

Non-prescriptive: In the usual curriculum, everything is prescribed from top to bottom, in the sense that it is determined in a decision-making center and presented to educational centers, but in a decentralized curriculum, this is quite the opposite. One participant in this regard states that:

In this approach, nothing is prescribed at all by people who are out of the curriculum, but all people are involved in it and their interests are taken into account (Participant No. 7).

Utility: The utility of the curriculum and its relation to students' lives was another theme

that participants in the research repeatedly emphasized. One participant in this regard states that:

In my opinion, communication with the community and the child's real life is one of the salient features of this educational approach, the content of this approach is not separate from the issues of the child's life (Participant No. 5).

Avoidance of prejudice: Avoidance of prejudices is one of the issues that are given special attention in this curriculum. One of the participants in this regard states that:

When the curriculum is decentralized and all cultures are considered equal, we no longer see prejudice (Participant No. 3).

Challenges

Risk of community fragmentation: In a decentralized curriculum, especially with emphasis on the culture of each group and ethnicity, there is a possibility of community fragmentation. One of the participant's states that:

Unfortunately, some cultures have not yet reached full intellectual maturity in this area, and the implementation of such a curriculum may lead to the fragmentation of society (Participant No. 14).

Risk of Ethnic Self-Determination: Ethnic self-reliance is one of the other risks that can occur with the implementation of this type of approach and curriculum. One of

the interviewees in this regard states that:

Some ethnicities, even without this type of curriculum, consider themselves superior to others. If this curriculum is implemented, this attitude will be doubled (Participant No. 2).

Theme 3: Economic

Opportunities

Attracting financial participation of the target community: By adopting a decentralized curriculum planning approach, the financial participation of local people will increase. One of the participants in this regard states that:

When you have a pre-determined curriculum that does not reflect anyone's opinion and does not care about their culture, it is clear that they do not pay any money for its flourishing, but on the contrary, when their culture and opinion is reflected, they are willing to invest in its implementation. (Participant No. 11).

Avoid wasting resources: Basically, when a program is developed locally, the waste of resources is minimized due to the transparency that is created for the members. One of the participants in this regard states that:

When the program is developed by the locals themselves, they have a sense of ownership, so they try to spend the ultimate source of obsession on the body (participant No. 9).

Challenges

High cost for resource development: In decentralized curriculum planning, costs increase dramatically due to the variety and multiplicity of curricula to be developed. One of the participant's states that:

When the curriculum is centralized, it is sent from the center to all provinces, but when it is decentralized, each province or city has its own curriculum, which increases costs (participant No 8).

Theme 4: Structural

Opportunities:

Loss of bureaucracy: Bureaucracy is one of the common features of all centralized programs that is minimized in the decentralized approach. One of the participants in this regard states that:

When a curriculum is formulated centrally, thousands of rules and regulations are sent with it, if a decentralized curriculum does not have this defect (participant No 15).

Direct communication between the planner and the learner: In a decentralized curriculum, there is a direct relationship between the developer and the learner. One of the participants in this regard states that:

Because in this approach, each province or city has its own planning committee, communication between learners and learners is easily established (Participant No. 7).

Challenges:

Lack of a unified structure: In decentralized curriculum

development, there is no unified structure for formulation, which leads to confusion. One of the interviewees states in this regard that:

In a decentralized approach, when you want to emphasize culture, many people do not know where to start at all because there is no one-size-fits-all guidelines and structure (Participant No. 10).

Chaos: Chaos is another disadvantage in implementing this approach. One of the participants in this field states that:

The decentralized curriculum approach is always fraught with ambiguity and confusion; this is doubled when we want to consider diverse cultures (Participant No 1).

Discussion and conclusion

There are several challenges and opportunities facing decentralization in high school curriculum with a focus on multiculturalism and cultural heritage, some of them are present in the present study, including flexibility, comprehensive participation, rejection of predetermination, focus on the interests of the child, non-prescriptive nature, avoidance of prejudice, practicality, attracting financial participation of the target community, avoidance of wasting resources, loss of bureaucracy, direct communication between developer and learner, risk of cultural rupture, ethnic and cultural hatred, cultural narcissism, risk of community fragmentation, risk of ethnic self-determination, the high cost of resources, the lack of a unified structure, and the chaos.

Curriculum decentralization is always accompanied by resistance from different parties. Curriculum decentralization depends to a large extent on the political, economic, social and cultural context of any society. Decentralization means the transfer of power from one level to another. Higher supervision goes to lower levels such as the province and the school. The tendency to decentralize the curriculum in different countries has started decades ago, while in Iran, the tendency to decentralization has emerged from a decade or two ago. But decentralization in practice has also faced limitations, especially when the emphasis is on culture and cultural heritage these limitations are severe and show themselves more. The present study summarizes some of these limitations and opportunities, so it is suggested that in decentralization of curriculum development, issues such as ethnic hatred, social disunity, ethnic self-aggrandizement, financial issues and turmoil must be considered. Special attention should be paid to the consequences of this type of curriculum.

References

- Adib Haj Bagheri, M; Parvizi, S and Salsali M. (2011). Qualitative research methods. Tehran: Bashari Publication. (in Persian)

- Aghazadeh, M. (2013). Investigating the status of decentralized curriculum in European countries and the United States. Conference on Concentration and Decentralization in the Curriculum Planning

Process. Kerman Shahid Bahonar University. (in Persian)

- Banks, J. A. (1999). *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education*, New York: NY 10016.
- Banks, J. A. (2004). Multicultural Education: Historical Development, Dimensions, and Practice. *Review of Research in Education*. Vol. 19, pp. 3-49
- Banks, J., & Banks, C. (2010). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Benett, C.I. (2003). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bond, C. (2006): *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, (England). 4th ed.
- Fathi Vajargah, K; Aghazadeh, M (2016). Meta-analysis of concentration and decentralization in education (with emphasis on the curriculum). Shahid Beheshti University. Tehran. (in Persian)
- Golnik,k & Chain, M. (2009). *Dictionary of multicultural education*. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), Phoenix: The Oryx Press. (51-53).
- Jay, G., & Jones, E. (2005). "Whiteness studies and the multicultural literature classroom" *Melus: The Journal of Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 30(2).
- Malik, K. (2010). *Multiculturalism* Retrieved February 18, 2013, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism>

- Mc Carthy, C. (1990). *Race and curriculum*. London, England: Falmer.
- Mc Carthy, C. (1993a). *Multicultural to the racial inequality in the United States*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mc Carthy, C. (1998a). *Rethinking liberal and radical perspectives on racial inequality in schooling: Making the case for nonsynchrony*. *Harvard educational review*, 58(3), 265-279.
- Mc Laren, P. (1995). *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference* Ed.: Christine E. Sleeter, Peter McLaren.
- McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (4th ed). Albany, NY: Allyn and Bacon.
- Salsabili, N. (2011). *Transition of Iran's curriculum planning system towards decentralization in designing and compiling curricula, with emphasis on school-based curriculum*. *Curriculum Studies Quarterly*, First Year, No. 4. (in Persian)
- Streubert, H. J. & Carpenter, D. R. (2003). *Qualitative Research in Nursing (Advancing the Humanistic Imperative)*, 5th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Yarmohammadian, M. (2014). *Area planning is a step towards decentralization in the process of educational policy-making in Iran*, conference on concentration and decentralization in the curriculum planning process. Kerman Shahid Bahonar University. (in Persian)

