

Educational Reform as Means of Social and Political Movements in Taiwan

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Abstract

Educational systems and movements generally reflect changes of the society. From 1994 to 2013 marked a stream of educational reforms in Taiwan.

During this time a total of ten Ministers of the Board of Education were in office and led reforms, while the central power shifted from Kuomintang (KMT) to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). There were some improvements in education but a high turnover rate of the ministers and reform leaders resulted in not enough time to prepare for reforms or transformation, and caused more pain for students and their parents.

During this time, many policies of education were established and revised. Scholars considered the educational reform as a process of an Awakening of Taiwanese self-consciousness and liberalization of education in Taiwan.

This paper will discuss how the political power directed the educational reforms and changed the society in Taiwan.

The Educational system reflects changes of a society. It is generally a response to complex political, cultural and social concerns. This situation is evident in Taiwan in recent decades. After World War II when the Republic of China's government retreated to Taiwan, the educational mechanism in Taiwan was given a vocational training outlook with an emphasis on training people for jobs along with training people for the right national spirit. Education was centered and controlled by the government. Textbooks were published and circulated by government owned institutes. Numbers of schools were limited. To enter a junior, high school or college, one had to pass the entrance examination. Teachers were recruited through the examination, sponsored, trained and placed to teach at the 1-12 public school settings by the Board of Education. Most of these teachers remained in the teaching profession until retirement. The Education system seemed to be stable and predictable.

Historical Backgrounds of Educational Reform in Taiwan

Traditionally Chinese followed Confucius' philosophy and emphasized the importance of education. Entering a school of prestige and getting a degree is expected and demanded by the family. In 1987 after the lifting of Martial Law, the educational reform was connected with social movements and was pushed by different interest groups in Taiwan. On April 10 in 1994, a group of concerned middle class parents marched to demand reforms in education which was called the 410 Movement. They criticized educational practice for not being flexible and not giving students choices to enter programs of their interest. Further, they argued students from disadvantaged families did not receive protection nor opportunities for education, thus the fairness and justice were challenged. They demanded educational reforms to reduce students'

pressure from entering high school and colleges and others. The Executive Yuan (行政院) had to answer requests from various roots groups.

The National Education Research Yuan (國家教育研究院 2015) reported the development of educational reform as followed:

1994	410 movement, Parents marched for educational reform
1994	the Executive Yuan established educational reform consortium committee
1996	the Executive Yuan submitted proposal for educational reform report
1998	the Executive Yuan passed 12 action plans for educational reform
2003	Professor Huang KK and others organized a hot line and intended to reestablish education
2009	National parent association and people's education foundation and grass roots groups marched and demanded on 712, the jargon is "I want 12 years compulsory education".
2011	The Board of Education (BOE) published a report for education of the Republic of China
2013	The Board of Education published education White Paper of Cultivating People

Most of the movements were organized and promoted by people. Critics observed the process and criticized the reform was only focused on short term results and a lack of long term

goals, and adopted some policies from overseas without thorough examination and consideration. The negative outcome was that people did not trust the action plans reported by the BOE and wasted national resources. However, with the involvement of parents and grass roots groups, school campuses have generated new energies with diversified innovations.

Demands of the Educational Reform

During the 1994 410 march, parents requested the government to make the following changes in education in order to reduce the students' stress from passing and entering high school and colleges:

1. Small size classes and schools: teachers can give individual students attention and administrators will manage schools with more effectiveness;
2. Establish more high schools and colleges: so every student has opportunities to choose and enter an appropriate high school and colleges;
3. Modernize education: schools need to utilize more technologies and reduce busy work and home work; and
4. Establish basic laws for education: to stabilize education system and ensure consistency of policies.

Results from the Educational Reform

A. Reform Results for Students

Reforms resulted in changing various ways to enter high school and colleges. It does not only rely on one entrance examination. Students can apply for schools based on their GPA, teachers' recommendations and county wide examination with the same grade. In 2011, schools were allowed to accept students' individual applications. As of 2014, the high school became compulsory education, thus it is "exam free". Judging an educational policy is effective based on whether the policy carrier can help students effectively (Lee, 2011). The process has not taken quality of education into consideration, thus did not meet the purpose of education. Promoting and implementing the policy without enough time to prepare for the transformation, the public questioned whether the policy for educational reform reached the anticipated goals for education.

B. Reform Results for Schools

To answer the request of establishing more schools, the government encouraged more construction of private high schools and colleges that can compete freely with the public schools. However, the government can close or merge public junior and high schools, but cannot force private schools to close if they did not recruit enough students. Vocational education and training programs were improved to provide workers for the society. The government also urged private schools to collect the same amount of tuition as public schools in order for all students to afford to go to colleges just like European countries. However, the government failed to control the quality of graduating students. Further, after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took the office, curriculum reform was based on political concerns which are intended to de-China.

Political Power Directed Educational Reform

According to Kwok's (2017) observation the educational and political changes in Taiwan during the late 1980s and early 1990s were 1) the pursuit of democratization in education by reformists, and 2) the pursuit of Taiwanization in education by the nativists. Kwok is not alone in his observation. Other scholars explained the political movement process as followed:

1). The Pursuit of Democratization: Huang (1999) proposed three main goals for educational reform to promote this pursuit: one is education should remain politically neutral; secondary, the Kuomintang (KMT) should relinquish control over curriculum and administrative affairs in schools and universities; and the third, anti-democratic hidden curricula, such as the personnel veneration of political leaders, should be cancelled.

2). The Pursuit of Taiwanization: Scholars Zhuang and Lin (2003) defined localizing education as *xiangtu hua* (鄉土化, the emphasis of native place), and educational indigenization (Taiwanization). Taiwanization is also known as the Taiwanese localization movement. This movement emphasizes the importance of a Taiwanese culture, society, economy, nationality, and identity rather than to be seen as a part of China. The aim is to construct a Taiwanese national identity.

To further make the point clear, Tu (2007) concluded the purpose and results of educational reform in Taiwan as the Awakening of self-consciousness and Liberalization of Education.

Awakening of Self-Consciousness

After the passing of president Chiang Ching-kuo, the political control was transferred to Lee Teng-hui, a native Taiwanese. Since then, a succession of political movements, generated by various groups, led to pursuing democracy, freedom and social justice in Taiwan. In the late 20th century, Taiwan is not only marching toward becoming a free society with a western-style democracy but also starting a journey of searching for its self-identity. Reforms included curricula emphasizing local history, (a course of “Understanding Taiwan” was offered in the middle of 1990, and a course of “Taiwan History” was created in 2006 for senior high school students), environment, and students were given opportunities to choose languages of Taiwanese (Fukinese), Haka, or Native Taiwanese indigenous languages. Needless to say that there was not enough time for the preparation to recruit qualified teachers.

Liberalization of Education

During the process of forging Taiwan’s collective consciousness drew the education reform to two issues—the liberalization of education and the diversification of education. The pursuit is the liberalized individuals, including teachers and students, as well as the educational system, which was formulated and led by the previous authoritarian government, and demanded a shift of de-centralization toward individualization. Changes included: textbooks were written and published by various educators and publishers; instead of buying one set of textbooks, parents felt the need to buy more sets to make their children competitive; any university that applied and passed the required components can offer teacher training programs, which resulted in too many teachers to compete for limited teacher vacancies; to recognize Taiwanese aboriginal, the government establish a new quarter for administrators run by native Taiwanese and provided resources for research and teaching of local culture.

Critics of Educational Reforms

Policies and reforms were established to answer the demands from the society. It is not without any examination and critics from scholars. Hsueh (2003) analyzed the problems of educational reforms are:

1. Most of the policies ended with only lip service and lack of professionalism, due to the policy makers intent to please voters;
2. Educational policies are not clear and only focuses on short term goals.
3. The high turnover rate of the Secretary of the Board of Education makes the policies unstable. During the era of 1994 to 2013, the society witnessed ten secretaries of Board of Education. Educational policies had not harvested the effect before the power was shifted.
4. Establishing many schools without the consideration of supply and demand cause the quality of schools and enrollment to be in question.

Another critic Chow (2003) observed how school culture used to be conservative and orderly before the lifting of Martial Law. After that, people demanded human rights, campuses had diversity and with different expectations. In the meantime teachers resisted changes and Parent Teacher Associations interfered with the implementation of policy. The question became whether the quality of education is higher than before? Or, whether students have learned more than before the reforms are waiting to be examined for the years to come.

Conclusion and Discussion

Purpose shapes vision and vision directs the effort. Any purposeful educational reform should begin with a serious consideration of the purpose of education. Meaningful educational reform needs to have purpose in mind. The educational reforms in Taiwan during 1994 to 2013 seemed to be pushed by grass roots groups and response by the government. The changes of central power also shifted the direction of the reforms and become political movements. Lack of a long-term plan resulted in insufficient time to prepare. The constant changes of the Secretary of Board of Education caused a lack of consistency of leadership and implementation of policies.

Exam-free high schools offered diversified ways for students to choose schools. However, constant changes in policies and curriculum confused students, their parents and teachers and added more burdens to them. The rapid increase of public and private high schools and colleges offered more opportunities and choices for students. Yet, some families chose to send their children to study overseas while the low birth rate in Taiwan resulted in many school struggling to recruit students. The increasing of self-identity and seeking for human rights made the individual voice to be acknowledged and respected; thus, changed the culture of school. Teachers and administrators are no longer the authority in schools.

In pursuing national identity, not only the minority groups were honored with resources and offices, a group of Taiwanese were voicing for the international society to accept Taiwan as an independent country. Such pursuit drew resistance and a strong response from mainland China. The gap between mainlanders and self-identified Taiwanese is getting wider. Conflicts and confusion further separate the union of people in Taiwan.

In fact, the international society has recognized the Republic of China in Taiwan which has been an independent entity and with its own constitution since 1949. People in Taiwan had worked hard together to gain respect and reputation as one of the Little Dragons in Asia. The political movement intended to pull Taiwan away from China without the consideration of the majority of people in Taiwan (with appropriately 97.5 % in Taiwan) are with Han ancestry. It breaks the harmony of the society.

The awakening process can be painful but it should be a healthy self-identity and assurance process. Taking Singapore as an example, the nation has gone through the same process but they honor different ethnicities. In the 1990s their national jargon was the more globalization, the more localization which means they acknowledged the need to have individual group identity with the priority to follow the national goal. The Singaporean government required schools to offer Chinese language learning and instill a curriculum of Confucius' philosophy due to more than 70% of Singaporeans having Chinese descents.

To sum up, the educational reform in Taiwan has resulted in some positive changes in education and the society as a whole. It has empowered parents and grass roots groups to voice their opinions and to receive attention from policy makers. We also noticed that the political involvement has stirred and divided the country and its citizens. Students, their parents, administrators and teachers are busy fixing their lives to meet and respond to the reforms. The political movement has not ceased to influence the education and policies after 2013. More reforms are forthcoming and we can only hope the politicians will take students' best interest into consideration. The citizens in Taiwan need to be courageous to voice concerns and consequences of educational reforms to the future of the country. Therefore, when we point a

finger at politicians, the problems in fact include all people in Taiwan. It would be a great benefit to the students of all stake holders put aside their political issues and work together.

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