Exploring Regional Development in School Actualization Program

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一、Introduction

The issue of equal educational opportunities has been one of the major concerns of Taiwan’s educational policies. Ministry of Education (MoE) endeavors to provide every student with fair and high-quality education through policies. To raise the quality of all senior high schools, MoE designs School Actualization Program (SAP) to provide funds for schools and assist them in developing actively. The practice of SAP may try to reduce the gap between rural and urban schools embodied for their differentiated resources (Yeh, 2013). Schools in rural regions usually obtain fewer resources than ones in urban areas and need extra resources hence. In case rural schools have the resources they need in actuality as urban ones through SAP, they may possess the same opportunities to grow. As senior high schools in every region can develop equally, all of the students attend high-quality schools somewhat. SAP thus aims to promote regional development in education through the offering of monetary resources (Cai, 2012; School Actualization Program, 2015). To clarify how SAP promotes regional development in education, I will try to explore it from the perspective of policy instruments in that they are the ones that transform policy goals into action (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

Policy instruments are tools generated in the social context (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007), might influence the implementation of policies (Cohen et al., 2007), and are designed by policy makers to solve problems caused in the policy process (Qiu, 2001). The conventional policy instruments proposed by McDonnell and Elmore (1987) are mandates, inducements, capacity building, and systems changing. Mandates are referred to the regulations or rules that promote the successful implementation of policies in a compelling way. Inducement signifies reward or commendations for policy implementers’ performance consequences. Capacity building means that a government provides funds to policy implementers or targeted group for the cultivation of material, intellectual, and human capacity. The short-term investment to increase the abilities of humans might expect the long-term productivity of organizations in the future (Rolfstam, 2009). The system changing depicts the mechanism in which the formal authority and the
forms of decision making are altered. Governments would use policy instruments to create economic or social results (Honig, 2009; Peters, 2000) associated with the objectives of policies, so policy instruments are crucial to successful implementation of policies. Mandate and capacity building are the two principal policy instruments utilized in SAP’s practice (Chen, Zhong, Lin, & Gao, 2012; Lin, 2015), while inducement and systems changing, the other two instruments, appear obscure in SAP itself.

二、Mandate

One of SAP’s policy features is the mandate made by MoE and regarded as the key principle of projects planned by schools (Lin, 2015). The regional development is clearly demonstrated in its mandate. The third and fourth objectives of SAP (School Actualization Program, 2015) indicate that SAP is aimed at an increase in the quality of schools in rural regions and to promote their educational development (Lin, 2013). Schools located in the areas of lack of resources are the ones for which SAP provided funds. Owing to the importance of regional development to SAP, school projects have to be planned based on its mandate. Experts reviewing projects would also decide whether to pass them partly in light of it.

The specific practice of regional development is further demonstrated in SAP. The criteria that select SAP schools regarding regional development are the ratio of low-income students, the number of public senior high schools, the number of students who attend schools in other cities, the number of legal teachers, and time to get to schools (School Actualization Program, 2015). Schools that run the risk in reducing enrollment are prioritized to obtain funds for improving their quality. Nevertheless, it is not easy for these schools to be supported through SAP. Firstly they can be allowed to lodge applications for funds on condition that they receive over 80 grades in their latest evaluations. Before getting involved in SAP, they should be assessed as medium-quality. Furthermore, it is necessary for them to propose their SAP projects to be estimated by MoE. The estimation would decide whether schools may acquire funds or not and the amount.

The mandate of SAP focuses on regional development in education to reveal the direction of assisting those schools in need to develop their quality and characteristics. To solve the problem that some schools may not pass the estimation, MoE chooses individual schools and provides them funds to implement specific projects (School Actualization Program, 2015). This regulation is added to SAP in 2015, and
the addition may imply that MoE intends to help those rural schools impotent to conceive outstanding projects to be chosen or guide the schools to develop through projects. The mandate can be one of the feasible approaches to enhance regional development in education.

三、Capacity building

One of SAP’s objectives is to facilitate the capacity of school administrators and teachers (School Actualization Program, 2015). The three principal approaches, self-management mechanism, experts’ counseling, and interscholastic activities, are adopted to establish their abilities. These three can be regarded as backup systems (Lin, 2012a, 2012b; Lin, Liu, Lin, & Lin, 2011) or empowerment mechanisms (Chang, 2013) about project implementation. The self-management mechanism provides schools themselves with support while those of experts’ counseling and interscholastic activities result from the outside of schools. How the three approaches build school intermediaries’ capacity to attain the regional educational development will be illustrated as follows.

(一) Self-management mechanism

The self-management mechanism is an approach for schools to evaluate project implementation on their own. The abilities of school intermediaries are expected to build through the mechanism of self-management (Lin, 2013). All of the SAP schools need to establish and operate it. The execution of projects should be examined schools themselves before they are inspected by the review committee. The examination is undertaken in the process of self-management. School intermediaries’ capacities involved in the second or third stage can be established through workshops or reexamination in the form of dialogue.

Setting up the mechanism of self-management can be a tough work for most of SAP schools (Shu, 2012). Those school intermediaries might not have complete experiences in monitoring their projects by themselves probably insomuch as the top-down supervision has imposed on them for a long while. The self-management mechanism can be merely run through following the process of implementing projects (Chen, 2011). Schools intermediaries do not understand how to establish and apply the mechanism well since they fail to identify the problems in implementing projects (Chang, 2009). To discover problems and seek for solutions are thus quite crucial to the realization of self-management. The self-management mechanism works well through computers, mobile devices, and social network. Shu (2012) applied Google Sites and Web 2.0 to
self-management of their SAP projects. School intermediaries instantly record and share data pertinent to project implementation through these innovative web instruments. Google Sites collects data about progress in implementation online and quickly shows the statistical results of data. School intermediaries use the results presented in charts or diagrams to monitor the progress. Web 2.0, on the other hand, may provide an online platform for school stakeholders to concern themselves with the performances of projects executed. The documents, photos, audio and video data about SAP are to be posted on the website and to receive feedback from stakeholders instantaneously. The quick and easy access to social network includes all of the interested parties in the mechanism of self-management and accelerates it hence.

(二) Experts’ counseling

Experts’ counseling is another feature of SAP. Owing to different problems that schools may encounter, they are not solved probably in a short while. Experts in SAP, composed of a professor and principal, enter schools to help them one time per semester. The experts can offer reasonable suggestions on those difficulties based on individual differences of schools (Lin, 2013). Before the visit of experts, school need to do preparation for it, such as the meetings before the visit, the complete data, and problems about the implementation of projects that should be sent to the counselors 10 days before the visit (Tu, 2012). The assistance of experts lessens the pressure imposed on school intermediaries but offers them opportunities to grow up. The intermediaries can enhance their capacities in the process of implementing projects (Tu, 2012). The counseling of experts assists intermediaries to understand quickly how to carry out projects (Lin, 2013).

The experts may help schools especially in the part of self-management for SAP. To make proper use of counseling meetings and adopt experts’ opinions may increase the effect of the implementation. The records of meetings ought to be put on the websites, and those school intermediaries find solutions to their problems from them (Shu, 2012). Schools have to strengthen members’ abilities to solve problems with the help of experts so as to execute projects effectively. The implementation of the SAP encounters the difficulty of carrying out SAP. This difficulty indirectly influences the morale of members. MoE should empower teachers and offer schools more power of autonomy (Chang, 2010).

Chang’s (2013) study indicates that the smaller schools are, the more SAP experts’ counseling are emphasized. The
finding reveals the need for small-size schools in rural regions for professional guidance about projects undertaken. The heavy workload of school intermediaries, however, results from the visit of experts to schools since plentiful data about the implementation of projects have to be prepared (Huang, 2011). Rural school intermediaries cannot afford to the data preparation due to few personnel resources and many administrative affairs. Schools’ additional need for experts’ assistance is proposed to the assigned experts or MoE, so experts can increase the times of their counseling to provide concise suggestions for project implementation (Lin, 2013).

As the meetings of counseling in some schools are held, only administrators without teachers attend them and teachers’ opinions on projects cannot be uttered in the meeting. Some schools do not propose the form of the need to show problems they face in written forms. Even if some questions are listed in the forms, most of them are official ones, such as budget, overworking, and issues about teaching or curriculum seldom appear. On the other hand, some schools do not keep in close contact with experts after the conferences, and it is thus hard for experts to maintain track of the improvement in these schools (Lin et al., 2011). In Chang’s (2009) case school, it is visited by experts only once mainly because schools do not actively propose its need for assistance. The simple one visit in a semester can not include the participation of teachers and not emphasized by schools.

(三) Interscholastic activities

School intermediaries learn from the interscholastic interchange of experiences about implementing SAP. The interscholastic activities can be held through conferences, school visiting, or learning communities (School Actualization Program, 2015). The first-stage schools have to attend the conferences for interscholastic interchange or visit other schools successful in executing SAP projects. The second-stage schools further build interscholastic learning communities composed of schools whose topics of projects are similar. School intermediaries of separate schools learn and grow with each other in the community. The third-stage schools need to broaden the scope of learning communities and deal with the interdisciplinary exchanges of learning with Taiwan’s or foreign senior high schools and universities. The establishment of cross-national learning communities promotes the development of school characteristics. All of the school intermediaries, including administrators and teachers, should attend the workshops for capacity building. It is expected that
intermediaries’ new abilities are developed hence in the seminars. The interscholastic activities promote the regional development.

Rural schools can develop with peer schools in the neighborhood. The same or similar developmental characteristics are formulated in projects of these schools concerning local culture. These schools facilitate the shared cultural characteristics through projects after interscholastic activities. As for the problem of interscholastic activities, is it easy to find schools in the neighborhood that run projects of similar topics as characteristics development is emphasized in SAP? Schools are suggested to develop their characteristics in light of their social and cultural backgrounds. The exchanges of schools are difficult to focus on the core topics regarding SAP projects but upon the problems about implementation instead.

四、Conclusion

Rural schools need to have potentials to develop their characteristics by making proper use of SAP’s funds. The success of these schools’ change will not accomplish until their projects are implemented appropriately. These schools are expected to be transformed into outstanding or characteristic schools during the three-stage involvement in SAP. School intermediaries need to take the time to develop curriculum and teaching specifically for students. Teachers may design curriculum for those low-performance students and instruct them through remedial education. Innovative instructional materials or equipment should be purchased after the careful assessment of schools’ need for the increase in students’ academic results. The personalized learning can be another focus of projects conceived for students. Investigating what students’ interest in learning directs the project planning of curriculum or activities. SAP’s funds can be thus invested in the development of personalized curriculum or activities. School intermediaries learn how to increase their effectiveness, raise students’ learning performances, and change parents’ or students’ viewpoints toward them through SAP.

References


School Actualization Program (2015).


