

# The Implementation of School Improvement Policy in Taiwan: A Case Study

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## Abstract

With the rapid growth of economy, more and more students had chosen to receive higher education than before in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education thus facilitated the 12-year basic education, including the school improvement policy, the School Actualization Program (SAP), in order to meet the need of high-quality post-secondary education. This study aimed to probe into students' viewpoints toward the implementation of the SAP through focus group interview in a case study. The major research finding was that most of students maintained positive attitudes toward its implementation.

**Keywords:** School improvement, School Actualization Program, Case study

## 1. Introduction

As Aitken & Aitken (2008) maintained that as the outer world around schools had altered dramatically with respect to the ways of knowledge sharing and mutual communication, schools had to respond to this change immediately. Through school improvement, school quality could be expected to enhance hence. In Taiwan, with the rapid growth of economy, more and more students had chosen to have higher education than before in Taiwan, proved by the fact that the percent of secondary school students attending post-secondary schools was up to 94.93% in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2009). This high attendance of post-secondary schools revealed the significance of post-secondary education for youngsters in the future, necessary to make current educational policies follow it. The Ministry of Education thus facilitated the 12-year basic education to meet the need of high-quality post-secondary education.

Nevertheless, although the number of post-secondary schools seemed to be sufficient, students' parents still desired to enter the so-called "outstanding high schools" and discarded "community high schools" or those schools in rural regions. In general, secondary school graduates needed to get high grades in the entrance exam to enter famous schools, expecting to receive better education. Thereupon, the Ministry of Education made up the educational policy, the School Actualization Program (SAP), to enhance the quality of those rural or community schools. This policy aimed to attract the graduates to enter these schools. There had been some quantitative or qualitative researches on the SAP, whose research mainly focused on the effectiveness of implementation (Chen, 2009; Chen, 2008; Liao, 2009; Lin, 2013; Pan, 2010). The perspectives of school staff upon the implementation of the SAP were explored in the studies above, but that of students were neglected. This study thus aimed to fill this research gap and tried to probe into students' viewpoints toward its implementation. The research question in this study was what students' opinions about the activities funded by the SAP were after they got involved in them. The research findings might uncover the effect of the SAP in the selected school.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *The purposes of the SAP*

The SAP had been implemented since 2007 and some post-secondary schools could obtain monetary support from it. The three purposes of the SAP were to build up the capacities of staff or teachers to intensify school quality, to encourage students to attend schools nearby, and to provide rural or community schools more educational resources. The achievement of these three purposes would contribute to the 12-year basic education. It was not easy for schools to gain monetary support from the SAP. Schools had to propose their projects first, and then the projects would be examined and scored by scholarly experts hired by the Ministry of Education. In case the projects were accepted, those schools could be given fund to implement their projects. The SAP consisted of three stages, including basic development, advanced innovation, and characteristic education. There were three years respectively in each stage. Schools had to participate in the SAP stage by stage. In case schools were not able to pass the evaluation of their implementation, they might lose the opportunities to enter into

the next stage.

### *2.2 The features of the SAP*

The SAP featured self-management in school and experts' assistance. The self-management could contribute to the success of the SAP's implementation within school, and the experts' assistance outside school would help school put the SAP into practice efficiently (Lin, Liu, Lin, Lin, 2011). The self-management should work in terms of school-based management (School Actualization Program, 2012). Schools might evaluate the effects of implementation according to it on their own. The evaluation would be undertaken through the school committee for the SAP. Both of quantitative and qualitative appraisals of projects had to be conducted in order to uncover if their objectives were attained. More importantly, what should be improved through self-evaluation would be raised as well so as to implement them better.

In addition, the scholarly experts' assistance would also provide support to schools' implementation of the SAP. The experts consisted of university professors and post-secondary school principals and they would be placed in charge of the professional assistance in implementing the SAP. As schools encountered problems about the SAP, the experts, usually one professor and principal, would offer suggestions to help schools solve the problems. The professor could give professional suggestions pertaining to how to write SAP school projects well and make them conform to the principles of the SAP. On the other hand, the principal would offer his or her own experiences about the implementation of the SAP to schools. This sharing of experience might reduce difficulties which could occur as projects were put into practice. Both professional assistance and experiential sharing were likely to help schools with the smooth and effective implementation of the SAP.

### *2.3 The students' learning pertaining to the SAP*

To enhance students' learning was expected to attain as school quality was intensified simultaneously (School Actualization Program, 2012). Obviously, it was of much importance for students to learn what they actually needed at school, so they could prepare for their social life in the future. Students' potentials and capacities ought to be built and developed well. In order to meet these needs, the SAP was exactly one of educational policies that aimed to increase students' academic performance. It would offer funds to schools so that they could increase teachers' teaching quality or purchase instructional facilities. The outcome of the SAP clearly indicated that students in the schools funded by the SAP could perform well in academic performance (Chen, P.-Y., Chung, Y.-C., Lin, G.-J., & Kao, C.-H., 2012).

As mentioned above, students' learning was regarded as one of significant elements in the SAP (School Actualization Program, 2012). SAP school projects had to include the enhancement of students' learning or further help students who suffered from learning disorder. The projects could be planned to strengthen students' academic performance by offering them extra or advanced learning opportunities. It was likely that students would benefit a lot from these opportunities. In the studies of plenty of SAP school projects, the

intensification of students' learning was highlighted through diverse literary or scientific curriculums (Chang, 2010). Furthermore, it was also of much importance to instruct students with learning disability. Schools needed to spend educational resources provided by the SAP on students with learning disability. Teachers with patience were chosen to instruct these students as they needed to have more time to learn than their peer. Some projects indeed included the instructional activities for these students in order to attain their educational equal opportunities (Chang, 2010).

### **3. Research Method**

#### *3.1 Focus group interview*

The focus group interview was always thought of as methods used in the qualitative researches. Because it could be compatible with three main assumptions of the qualitative research paradigm, including the existence of multiple views of reality, the recognition of influence of the inquirer and respondent relation, and the nature of truth statements affected by a perspective (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). As the purpose of this study was to explore students' perspectives on the SAP in a post-secondary school, not to collect the large quantitative data from a number of schools, the qualitative method ought to be adopted appropriately. The viewpoints of students toward the implementation of the SAP uncovered in this study might present the multiple points of view besides those of teachers or staffs. This study thus aimed to be done in the context of a community school involved in the SAP, and the focus group interview was adopted to represent the real statements of students.

#### *3.2 Data source*

Six third-grade students in Happy school were selected by the researcher to join in the focus group interview. The SAP had been implemented in that school for three years, and the six third-grade students had also participated in the projects from beginning to end. They might have better perceptions or feedbacks on these projects than other students. The ideal size of a focus group could be six to twelve participants, and less than six or more than twelve people in the group might be inappropriate either for the limited narrowed discussions or for the lack of chances to express opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Therefore, the selection of six students in this study basically met the research requirement of focus group interview, and these participants would have more opportunities to share their opinions or observations.

### **4. Research Results and Discussions**

There were six projects in Happy school's SAP projects directly related to students, including the building of students' capacity, activity of hand-made books, career visit, dramatic performance, scholarship of encouraging enrollment, and purchase of instructional equipments. Students' response and feedback to these projects in the focus interview would be presented below.

#### *4.1 The building of students' writing capacity*

The composition camps were held in Happy school in order to elevate students' language

capacity during the winter or summer vacation. The instructors of the camps were noted Chinese teachers invited by the United Daily News Group. Two of six students in the focus group participated in the camps. One student regarded the camp as helpful:

I think it may help me understand how to write a good Chinese composition and can get high grades in the Basic Competence Test for Secondary School Students. (S4-1)

Nevertheless, another student had different perspective on it:

In my opinion, I don't think it helps me a lot actually for I have learned what the instructor prepares for us. In case the instructor can offer us something different, I will be encouraged to participate it. (S6-2)

These two students' opinions toward the effects of the camps varied. Maybe the camps might have positive influence upon students' Chinese writing. However, the teacher could need to prepare for a variety of instructional materials for students with different levels so that they might learn better in the camps than in the classrooms.

Aside from the camp, students interviewed also participated in the essay contest. Students had to ask for teachers to instruct them how to write essays. Some experts outside school who mastered essay writing would be invited to assist students. Five of six students looked upon these programs as helpful to the preparation for it:

The expert has ever instructed a number of students who win prizes in the contest. (S2-6)

Because we are given books concerning how to write an essay, we can follow the instructions offered by the books to prepare for the contest step by step. (S1-4) We are taught how to review the literature and to collect and analyze the data. (S5-8)

These students indicated that they learned a lot about essay writing, which was not taught at school originally. With the help of teachers and experts, students could have the opportunities to win prizes in the contests.

The Happy school's library held the activity of hand-made books in order that students would develop their literacy of art. One student in the focus group took part in the activity while the other students had no interest in it due to their immersions in academic learning. The student said that

It is interesting for me to learn the skills of making books out of recycled materials, such as paper, bottles, or glass. To share our hand-made works with others has much fun actually. (S3-7)

Because students tended to spend time on study, to encourage them to take part in artistic activities was significant. Cultivating students' literacy of art would make some of them uncover their potentials for art.

#### *4.2 Career visit*

The Happy school's counseling office held life-career visits to universities and factories in the neighborhood, to which students might attend or work in the future. The visits aimed to

assist students to understand whether they would choose to have advanced study in the university or to find jobs in the factories. Two of six students participated in the visits and both of them held positive attitudes toward them:

To visit universities is the best part of this visit on account of the fact that we can get the latest information about the universities we may attend in the future as early as possible. (S1-10)

In my opinion, we can not only take a trip to certain sightseeing like museums or scenic spots but most important of all, have the further understanding of future work environments and may help us to choose which courses we can take. (S2-12)

To make a visit to the places where students would study or work in the future could be helpful to students' life-career choices even though they still need to spend a full day on the visits. Students seemingly appeared excited about the visits as they had chances to see the outer world.

#### *4.3 Dramatic performance*

Character education was highlighted and regarded as one of fundamental educational developments in Happy school. The famous Chinese itinerant theatrical troupes were invited to have performances for students. All of the six students had watched those dramatic performances, and they found them interesting and meaningful:

These dramatic performances have much fun and always make me laugh at every moment. We can learn something about morality in the dramatic plays and they may instruct me how to behave like a good moral person. (S6-3)

Another student learned something meaningful in the performances:

The most important thing I have learned in the performance is why and how to keep good interpersonal relationship and get along well with others well. I was taught to show my concern for others, especially my family and peers. (S4-11)

Students' feedback might indicate that the performances were successful to promote character education. The success of the performances also implied that character education could be instructed not by reading moral principles in the textbooks but by watching performances vividly on the stage, preferred by the youthful.

#### *4.4 Scholarship*

The Happy school provided scholarship funded by the SAP for students, who could get high grades in the entrance examination or win prizes in the national contests. The scholarships might encourage secondary school graduate to attend this school or support students to take part in the contests. Two of the six students received the scholarship but these two students obviously did not know it before entering this school:

It is indeed helpful a lot to me for paying school fee. I am not informed of any scholarship provided by the Happy school when I decide to choose this school, but I think that the money

can be spent on reference books to enhance my learning effectiveness. (S4-15)

I am not given any money but I heard that my classmates have scholarship for winning prizes of the national contests. I believe it is appropriate to urge students to participate in the contests by means of financial support. (S5-8)

To provide scholarships for students could be the incentive to make students active in learning as they spent money on learning materials like reference books. These learning materials could help students to master learning or prepare for the contests. Students seemed interested in money as the incentive to have outstanding performances in the exams or contests.

#### *4.5 The purchase of instructional equipments*

In order to enhance student learning, the Happy school undertook an SAP project to purchase instructional equipments for the use of students. The equipments included chemical or physical equipments and the library information broadcast LCD system. Most of students interviewed were glad to have these equipments to facilitate their learning:

This project would contribute to the progress in students' conducting experiments in science class. Actually, we seldom have opportunities to do experiments due to insufficient experimental equipments even though experiments are quite interesting to us. The experiments can be the incentives for us to study Chemistry and Physics. (S3-10)

Moreover, the library information broadcast LCD system, hung on the wall of the library, was the equipment to broadcast the latest information about the library for students. Two students of the six had opinions about this system:

It is just like a general monitor which plays quite a lot of stuff in which I am not interested at all. Why not play the NBA or MLB games for us to watch? (S1-9)

Strictly speaking, though it may not be helpful a lot, the information about the library indeed urges me to enter the library. (S2-9)

These two students' opinions about the system indicated the positive and negative comments about it. Perhaps the library should provide attractive information through the system in which students might take interest so as to increase its frequency of use.

According to the students' responses to the five SAP projects in the Happy school, most students in the focus group interview positively supported them and considered them helpful to learning. However, though students' positive comments were more than negative ones, the negative ones still needed to be improved. The purposes of those improvements were to attract students to participate in the activities or curriculums and to make students benefit from them. That is, the SAP projects ought to contribute to students' aptitude-oriented learning and help students to how they could learn well at school. Only when students' quality of learning performance could be enhanced could school quality increase hence.



## 5. Conclusion

In the case study, those SAP projects obviously focus upon the enhancement of students' learning. In spite of the fact that not all students got involved in the projects, it was worth that some students might gain profit from them. The next steps the Happy school could take were to encourage more students to take part in the projects and continuously find out students' need of learning to include them in the projects. That is, to make the projects fit for students was the continuous efforts they should make.

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