

# Choice as a global language in local practice: A mixed model of school choice in Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper uses school choice policy as an example to demonstrate how local actors adopt, mediate, translate, and reformulate “choice” as neo-liberal rhetoric informing education reform. Complex processes exist between global policy about school choice and the local practice of school choice.*

*Based on the theoretical sensibility of global-local framing, this paper discusses how a neo-liberal discourse of education reform came about in Taiwan and in particular how the Fundamental Education Act of 1999 introduced choice. The Act incorporated choice as global rhetoric into existing school practice, resulting in a hybrid school-choice model which mixes a civil rights model and a market model. This study compares two junior high schools to illustrate how this hybrid model of school choice plays out in the complex realities of actual schools and discusses the effects of such a hybrid school-choice model on broader Taiwanese public education. This paper concludes that the school choice practices of parents, compounded with the neo-liberal rhetoric of education reform in Taiwan, is rapidly exacerbating the great disparity between public junior high schools.*

*Keywords: school choice, parental involvement, globalization, local, hybridization*

## INTRODUCTION

Many countries, including Australia, England, and the United States, have used neo-liberal ideas to restructure so-called unresponsive and inefficient public school systems. Neo-liberal policy initiatives are reshaping educational systems in complex and varied ways globally and locally (Arnone, 2003; Burbules and Torres, 2000; Popkewitz, 2000, 2003; Rizvi, 2004). As adopted in Taiwan, these same ideas have produced different meanings. Although Taiwan's neo-liberal ideas of education reform derive from the United States and Australia, local entities have reformulated these policies and reinserted them into local contexts to meet particular interests and personal needs. Education reform efforts must deal not only with global concerns, such as global competitiveness and efficiency, but also with local educational problems, such as educational democratization and education fanaticism in Taiwan (Ho, 2009).

There are always multiple logics behind the local adoption and adaption of global discourses of education reform and restructuring. To explore these logics, in this study I use school choice as an example of how the state and reformers have integrated a neo-liberal sense of education reform policies into the public school system and how the local participants (including parents) have transformed the choice policy into a hybrid model of civil rights participation and market competition. I also discuss the effect of this hybrid model on local schools by comparing two

extreme cases of junior high schools in terms of the reasons and strategies behind parental choice and modes of parental involvement.

In the first section of this paper I discuss a theoretical framework that informs global and local framing of education reform policy. In the second section I briefly introduce the Taiwanese school catchment system and a loophole within it that, exploited by parents for many years, has thus become part of the system. In the third section I present an ethnographic study of two junior high schools in terms of parental choice and involvement. In the fourth section I formulate a hybrid school-choice model and discuss its broader impact on the Taiwanese education system.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AS A GLOBAL AND LOCAL MIXTURE**

“Choice” is one of the key slogans of education reform in many countries. The assumption is that “centralization and bureaucratization are substantially at odds with the effective organization of schools and the successful provision of education” (Chubb and Moe, 1990, p. 142). This assumption brings decentralization, deregulation, and choice into the discourse of education reform. Choice and quality frameworks increasingly embed or subsume equity concerns. By re-embedding issues of quality and equity within choice and accountability frameworks, neo-liberal thinking about education reform is not only popular, but also very seductive for many governments across the globe. As many theorists point out, there is a global convergence of education restructuring in which global ideas of reform are usually internalized within a national debate, so that when a society adopts the international language of reform (such as market, choice, and deregulation), it serves not only as a functional strategy of reform, but also as a local discourse partially projecting particular national interests and political ideologies (Ozga and Lingard, 2007; Ozga et al., 2006; Popkewitz, 2000, 2003).

Popkewitz (2000) mentions that any discourse of education reform is a hybrid that appropriates global discourses into national concerns. He points out that when a nation deploys a global discourse of reform to reformulate its national education system, reform ideas tend to be adopted without considering their history in terms of time and place. They travel across national boundaries in the form of universal principles, but are also reformulated into transmogrified forms that meet particular national and local interests.

Taiwan is a case in point. During the period from 1987 through the 1990s, deregulation and liberalization as the leading discourses of the education reform movement were strongly intertwined with the national idea of democratization (Mao, 1997; Xue, 1996). They resonated with Taiwan’s social leanings toward democratization, which involved a range of initiatives to increase local autonomy and strengthen civil society relative to authoritarian state control. Thus, the reformulation of global ideas of neo-liberalism for education reform in the Taiwanese context has not necessarily been the same as the corresponding formulations discursively constructed in the United States or England (e.g., Apple, 2000; Whitty, 1997). There was a process of hybridization already underway when the global idea of neo-liberalism for education reform was adopted in Taiwan during the 1990s. The discourses of these reform efforts were not only tied to the ideas of national democratization and social justice, but also heavily relied on borrowing strategies from neo-liberal ideas of education restructuring, such as choice (Mao and Chang, 2005; Ho, 2009). Combining the global and local levels of policy borrowing and hybridization, in this paper I take two junior high schools in Taiwan as examples of what happens as these neo-liberal reform policies travel down to the local level and are refracted through a local system that has already developed its own local practice of school choice. In the following section I introduce Taiwanese school culture and school choice practices, and how, since the 1990s, they have been

reshaped by the neo-liberal education policies formulated in response to Taiwan's education reform movement.

### **School choice in the catchment area system**

In the Taiwanese education system, elementary school education and lower-level secondary education are compulsory and free for children between the ages of 6 and 15. Recent statistics show that 97.6% of elementary and junior high schools are public, with only a very small number of private schools (2.4%) (Ministry of Education, 2014). The public elementary and junior high school a student attends is determined by a system of catchment areas based on the geographic distribution of public schools, so as to ensure that students can attend nearby schools in accordance with the rules laid out in the Constitution. This school system aspires to provide equal educational opportunities by providing equal funding for all schools. Such a public education system reflects the assumption that each public school provides the same quality of education. However, a primary concern of parents is that their children pass the competitive entrance examination for prestigious high schools. There is a gap between providing equal quality of public education and the personal desire for upward social mobility. As many Western studies point out, where you live can significantly affect the quality of your children's educational experience (Elmore, 1986; Wells & Crain, 1992). However, for some parents in Taiwan, this quality is more an issue of which schools your child attends than an issue of where you live. Therefore, parents tend to believe that only "superstar schools"<sup>1</sup> can properly prepare their children for passing the entrance exams to prestigious high schools. As a result, if no such "superstar school" is located within a given catchment area, many parents simply change the family's official address without actually moving their residence. Parents devote much time and energy to deciding which school to enrol their children in and where to live, which creates problems for popular schools because applications far exceed available places. Such situations are much worse in densely populated areas than in less densely populated regions (Lin, 2000; Chang, 2000).

### **The Taiwanese educational reform movement since the 1990s**

While parents continuously update and share their knowledge of school choice strategies in their catchment area, Taiwanese society and the Taiwanese education system have also been undergoing rapid changes. In the 1990s the democratic movement argued for deregulation in education by transferring decision-making powers from central control to public control (Mao, 1997). Parents' right to exercise greater choice over their children's education embodied the democratic ideal and individual civil rights. Promoting parental choice and parental involvement justified the push to make schooling more diverse and more responsive to the needs of parents. It was claimed that parental choice and involvement could serve not only to correct an overly authoritarian style of schooling, but also to improve the quality of education (Yang & Lin, 1994; 410 Education Restructuring League, 1996). The call for education reform in the 1990s reflected the social trend of democratization and efficiency that involved a range of initiatives to increase local autonomy and the transfer of state control to local management.

In the aforementioned social and political context, the discourses of parental choice, parental involvement, and education rights finally became a part of the Fundamental Education Act, approved by legislators in the national assembly and announced in 1999. The Act clearly includes provisions which increase parents' ability to choose which schools their children attend, promote private sector involvement in establishing schools, and allow for the "publically funded-privately run" model in the public school system. The Act also provides a legal basis by which parents are

eligible to participate in the decision-making processes underlying the formation and execution of school policies and have the right of educational choice in terms of selecting schools, educational content, and instruction methods.

Although choosing a school outside the family's catchment area is not uncommon, and although the Fundamental Education Act legally ensures parents' right to choose their children's education, what are the compounding effects of such a reform policy on local school practice? Who will benefit from such a new hybrid policy? How will parents exercise their right to choose, and how will they involve themselves in school affairs? The problematic of these questions comes from the theoretical sensibility in which choice as the global idea of reform, rather than following a direct route, circulates and is then incorporated into existing local practices. Next, I introduce two schools as examples of parental choice, participation, and involvement in daily school life at the current conjuncture of global-local policy circulation and local appropriation of reform policy.

### **METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION**

In this section I compare two schools (School A and School B) in terms of parents' strategies of choice and modes of involvement. School A and School B are junior high schools located in the greater Taipei area.

**School A** is located in a prosperous area of Taipei City. The socio-economic status of the students' parents is, on average, higher than that of School B. Many of School A's parents work at big corporations and a hospital nearby. Because a consistently high percentage of its students attend top-end high schools, School A is widely recognized as one of the most popular superstar schools in Taipei.

**School B** is located in one of Taipei's satellite cities, nearby the intersection of two major highways and quite close to a soon-to-be-established line of the MRT (Metropolitan Rapid Transit). Because of its convenient location and flexible transportation options, new housing projects started appearing in this area twenty years ago, attracting many new families and young couples who could not afford the prohibitively expensive real estate in Taipei City. School B serves both old and new communities, and features a racially and ethnically diverse student body. Most of its students are graduates of the three elementary schools in its catchment area. These three elementary schools respectively represent the three different kinds of communities in the region: traditional, aboriginal, and new. The traditional community comprises families who have lived there for many generations working in occupations related to agriculture. This area also attracts many aboriginals from the east coast of Taiwan who migrate to the city looking for work. The third community comprises residents who have arrived in the area in the last decade, whose ethnic and racial background tends to be Han-Chinese, and who tend to hold white-collar jobs.

The following two tables present the basic information about these two schools.

**TABLE 1. Basic Information about School A and School B for 2009**

Item	School A	School B
Space	27,421 m <sup>2</sup>	34,248 m <sup>2</sup>
Average space per student	10.07 m <sup>2</sup>	28.05 m <sup>2</sup>
Number of classes	72	39
Number of students	2,724	1,221
Number of teachers	171	84
Student-teacher ratio (national average is 15:1)	15.93	14.54

**TABLE 2. High school admission of graduates of School A and School B for 2009**

Item	School A	School B
Total number of graduates	925	508
Number of graduates who gained admission to a public high school	648 (70%)	91 (18%)
Number of graduates who gained admission to one of Taipei's top three high schools	224 (24%)	10 (2%)

As Table 1 shows, the two schools differ little in terms of student-teacher ratio, owing to the equal distribution of educational resources stipulated by national education provisions. However, there is a significant difference between School A and School B regarding four matters: number of students, average space for each student, the percentage of graduates who gained admission to one of Taipei's top three high schools, and the percentage of graduates who gained admission to a public high school.

This research was conducted from September 2008 to June 2009. I paid regular visits to each school and attended various school-wide and class-level activities, especially both school-wide and class-level parent association (PA) meetings, usually held at the beginning of the spring and fall semesters. At each school I interviewed the head of the school-wide PA, the principal, the

director of academic affairs, and three homeroom teachers. With the school staff, I asked what reasons parents gave for choosing the school and how the parents participated in school affairs and the PAs. With the heads of the PAs, I asked about the duties and functions of the PAs and about school-PA relations. I processed and thematically coded the in-depth interview data to illustrate the complex realities of school choice and parental involvement at the two schools. The major themes identified are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Summary of major themes**

	School A	School B
1. Reasons behind choice of school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· School's impressive academic performance / status</li> <li>· Student clubs' excellent performance in national competitions</li> <li>· Attractive ethos (achievement orientation, highly competitive)</li> <li>· Experienced and devoted faculty</li> <li>· Near parents' place of work</li> <li>· Sibling-related factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· School's appeal to parents' aspirations for improved academic performance</li> <li>· School's community-based appearance</li> <li>· New school with good facilities</li> <li>· Near parents' home</li> <li>· Spacious campus with great view</li> </ul>
2. Modes of parental participation and involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Volunteering and financial donations</li> <li>· Parental supervision of homework</li> <li>· Enjoyment of social-structure resources</li> <li>· Influencing the allocation of teachers in parents' favour</li> <li>· Taking strong initiatives to establish an afterschool program for entrance-exam preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Volunteering</li> <li>· Little or no supervision of homework</li> <li>· Absence of pronounced parental participation or only limited social and cultural capital and time</li> <li>· Different views of and approaches to afterschool programs for entrance-exam preparation</li> </ul>
3. Dynamic of the school's culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Competition among teachers</li> <li>· Highly regarded teachers and classes</li> <li>· Pride in being associated with the school's revered "brand name"</li> <li>· Student hardship and stress over learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Teachers' and parents' ambivalence over presence in school: should I stay or should I go?</li> <li>· Inexperienced teachers</li> <li>· Assigning blame to others</li> <li>· Viewing aboriginal community as a bad</li> </ul>

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influence upon their students

- The principal's strong and even inflexible leadership
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### **Modes of parental participation and involvement**

The Fundamental Education Act enshrines parents' right to participate in school affairs. Article 8 of the Act outlines two dimensions of this right. One is the parents' right to choose which schools their children attend, educational content, and methods of instruction. The second is their right to participate in decision-making in school policies and development. The Act requires reserving at least one-fifth of school board positions for PA members. Traditionally, teachers have a high status in Taiwanese society, and parents respect teachers and appreciate what schools do for their children. However, such an unconditional respect and appreciation has been somewhat undermined by parents' increased rights in education. The daily practices of parental involvement in Schools A and B have resulted in a transition from education as a given to education as an entitlement.

Previously, the main function of the PA was fundraising for the school, with very limited involvement otherwise. Rather than working in equal partnership with parents, both school administrators and teachers preferred that parents respond to teachers' requests for such assistance as support at special events and class supervision. However, since the enactment of the new legislation, this situation has been changing. School A, for example, has benefited from its PA's donations as well as parents' devotion of substantial amounts of time to school-related matters. However, there has been a growing ambivalence on the part of teachers toward parental involvement in school-related matters. Teachers, on the one hand, appreciate parents' supervision of students' classroom work and parents' help in organizing afterschool programs. On the other hand, teachers complain about parents' obsession with drills and tests in preparation for the entrance exam—an obsession that places pressure on teachers and can interfere with their professional role. Some of School A's parents participate not only in classroom management and teaching, but also in the school's decision-making, including the review and selection of principals, curriculum development, and the allocation of homeroom teachers and subject teachers. Some teachers resent this parental monitoring of teachers, resulting in a contradictory blend of parents' polite support of school-initiated matters and parents' sometimes forceful efforts to guide certain affairs, especially regarding their children's "best interests" in achieving outstanding academic performance.

Due to school B's diverse student body (reflecting three different demographic groups) its PA is less united and less competent than School A's. I discovered that there were different factions within School B's PA, each with differing opinions about the future development of the school. Some parents supported the school's policy of keeping a special program on aboriginal culture in the curriculum, mainly as a way of gaining extra-funding from the government, while some parents were strongly against it, claiming that it tainted the reputation of the school, resulting in lower enrolment over time. An overarching consequence of these differences was that School B's PA had difficulty achieving consensus. There was also a growing distrust between the parents and the school administration, as well as among parents. Compared to School A, where most parents and teachers were vocally proud of their association with the school because of its academic reputation, at School B many people affiliated with the school blamed others for perceived

failings at the school. In such an atmosphere, many parents and staff sometimes wondered whether they should stay or go.

From school-choice strategies to forms of parental participation, there was a huge difference between the parent-teacher interactions at the two schools. At School A some influential parents were able to exercise significant power over the school, not only by identifying and taking advantage of loopholes in admission procedures, but also by forming an information-sharing network about school policies and teacher performance. These parents dominated the school board and steered school policy toward their personal interests. In this way, parents and the school were not working in partnership. Teachers felt that the PA had them under observation, which created unhealthy competition amongst teachers for winning over parents' and gaining their support and praise. In contrast, the factional orientation between School B's three communities weakened or even prevented connections among parents, causing further distrust between school staff and among parents, essentially paralysing the function of the PA.

### **School choice: Community or Market? Diversity or Disparity?**

According to the National Education Act, educational authorities must provide Taiwanese children with equal access to good-quality schools, regardless of social status or location. Yet, the Fundamental Education Act allow parents to choose which schools their children attend. When the Ministry of Education integrated parental choice into public schools, it assumed that parents would act in their best interests, thus strengthening parental participation in public schools. The policy was viewed not only as providing avenues for exercising civil rights, but also as a strategy for improving schools. However, the implementation of such a policy needs to be seen as situated in a historically embedded choice practice and culturally bounded social network.

In a democratic society, education plays a key role in developing capacities that enable people to become involved in the political process. This was the aim of enacting the Fundamental Education Act in the context of the political democratization and educational liberalization occurring in Taiwan during the 1990s. The Act states that educational rights are part of one's civil rights. It protects individuals from unwarranted action by government and guarantees the right to participate in school affairs without discrimination. Promoting parental involvement gives the impression that granting opportunities for participating in a decision-making process will create a sense of collective choice for improving schools within communities. However, the long-standing habit of middle-class parents choosing superstar schools also poses a challenge to the collectivism of the community.

Levin (2007) suggests that local management is different from parental involvement. He asserts that local management and parental involvement are only sensible if the policy assumes a genuine interest in the community. However, there are two senses of community: a social group in a specific locality, and a group sharing common characteristics and interests. Levin takes community in the former sense. In this regard, the present study shows that the school staff of School A is very proud of its talented students but has a less pronounced sense of being a community school than does School B. As School A's director of academic affairs noted, "We are not a community school. . . . [But] our school attracts students from at least fifty-four different elementary schools."

Parents involved in School A had their own sense of community (sharing the same interests and characteristics) because many of their children attended the same primary school together. These parents exercised collective strategies for participating in school life, and shared similar economic, cultural, and social capital, giving rise to a network in which parents looked to other



parents for help in deciding how to get involved in their school. The objective of this involvement was to strengthen their children's future prospects. Parents with economic, cultural, and social resources could compensate for perceived deficiencies in the school budget, teaching resources, and teaching practices. By congregating together in the PA, these parents could wield even more power over school practices. Whether acting individually or in coordination with one another, parents at School A participated in the school's decision-making process as a way of enhancing their children's education.

This situation also applied to School B. Parents at School B who were involved as volunteers also created strong links with each other, maintained close contact with the principal and classroom teachers, and drew on resources to protect their children's interests. As the head of the PA bluntly pointed out, many parents sought to be elected to the PA in order to strengthen opposition to the school's aboriginal program. Furthermore, members of the PA persuaded the principal to apply for a "talented and gifted students" program in the hopes of both attracting better students to the school and producing graduates who end up attending a top-end high school.

Although proximity was a popular reason for parents' selection of School B, academic performance remained a major concern for many parents, especially those belonging to the new community, many of whom were not always impressed by School B in this regard. Indeed, it was the parents of the new community who were most likely to identify nearby alternatives and opt out of School B. And because their community and School B are on opposite sides of a river, and because transportation from their community to the school was not convenient, choosing another school was feasible. Moreover, parents who based their decision on academic performance tended to withdraw their children from School B. A parent whose oldest child attended school B and whose younger child attended an elementary school in the new community said,

Every time I try to convince parents [who have a child in elementary school] to send their children to [School B], they always ask about the percentage of its graduates who go on to a top-end high school. I just tell them it's improving now. If smart students like yours come to our school, then it'll be much better. How can we expect School B to boast of excellent performance if we keep sending our children to other schools?

### **The parent continued,**

Many parents do not believe the school is academically sound. If everyone gets caught up in a superstar school's name power, our community will never have a chance, since talented students will go elsewhere. If people don't support their own community, it'll never get better. Therefore, with my husband's support, we keep our children at [School B].

The Act and related new policies have helped formally redraw the boundaries between parents and schools, effectively creating new incentives for parental involvement in school affairs. One aspect of these redrawn boundaries is an interaction between the policies of parental involvement (including choice) and parents' sometimes fanatical preoccupation with their children's exams. Unlike the education systems of Western countries, where a neo-liberal sense of parental choice rests on perceptions of school differentiation, the Taiwanese educational system has created a hierarchy of junior high schools ranked according to graduates' performances on exams. The performance of a junior high school's students on high school entrance exams heavily influence Taiwanese parents' choice of school for their children. Most parents' objective is to have their children positioned as high as possible on the academic totem pole. The test-driven admission system favours superstar schools. The new act ensures the role of the PA and promotes general parental involvement in schools. In this regard, some parents have gained ground in mobilizing

school resources to ensure that their own child's "best" educational interests are met. A teacher at School A pointed out a salient irony: "People often say that our school has the quality of a private school but the price of a public school, but our efficiency [i.e., the school's capacity to churn out graduates eligible for attendance at top-end high schools] is more like a cram school's."

Following Taiwanese society's awakening sense of citizenship rights, the public school system promotes parental participation. However, parents tend to exploit this feature of the system to expand resources that can strengthen their children's performance on entrance exams. As a result, superstar schools do not have to fight for a greater share of the education market or struggle to find a market niche. All they have to do is to keep responding to parents' demands for high exam scores. Such a cycle leaves little room for either innovation in school development or diversity in educational programs, both of which are critical if schools are to meet the diverse needs of students.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Taiwan's school choice policy mixes a civil rights model with a market model. The former entails decentralization and giving more authority to schools and parents. Consumer choice drives the latter, in which parents act according to their own best interests when choosing a school. Such a mix consists of two ironies. First, the democratization-inspired impulse to strengthen people's right to education derives largely from neo-liberal ideas of choice but has been channelled into initiatives that have widened the gaps between public schools. Although the Fundamental Education Act provides moral and legal grounds on which parents can choose schools and participate in school affairs, the very limited choice in terms of schools, programs, and curriculum means that "choice" is merely a catchword chiefly referring to the choice of public schools whose graduates perform well on exams. Moreover, Taiwan's education policy encourages parental participation in educational matters in a way that can create further disparity among public schools and facilitate stratification in the public education system.

The second irony is that in Taiwan's public education system the value of social diversity and equity is contradicted by the value of market competition. Parents' choice of and involvement in School A have made it highly competitive because it operates under the formidable pressure of parents' constant monitoring and comparing. In contrast, most parents of School B seem relatively passive in terms of being market-based consumers. Even though School B was viewed as a part of the community, the sense of community was divided. In this sense, it can be seen that school choice along with parental involvement and participation can lead to heightened social competition and segregation rather than community management and improvement.

## **Notes**

1. Because junior high graduates must take a very competitive entrance examination to attend senior high schools, parents pay particular attention to which junior high schools have a high percentage of graduates gaining admission to prestigious public senior high schools. This percentage has become the major indicator of school performance for parents when evaluating junior high schools in a particular region (such as the Taipei metropolitan area). Such a ranking is not official, but rather popular information circulating among parents and the general public. Schools having a high percentage of graduates going to prestigious public senior high schools become the most desirable junior high schools. Such highly popular junior high schools are typically termed "superstar schools."

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