Educational reform in Taiwan: change and continuity since the change in ruling party

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BACKGROUND

An educational system is generally a response to complex political, cultural and social concerns. So, like any other, Taiwan’s educational system, too, is conditioned by its history.

After the II world war, the traditional Chinese system was implemented almost unchanged in Taiwan, aiming at the eradication of all Japanese colonial influences. In 1949, the education mechanism in Taiwan was given a vocational training outlook, with the emphasis on training people for jobs as well as educating them in the ‘right’ nationalist spirit, largely resulting from the government’s well-known intention to make Taiwan the solid base to win the Chinese Continent over. Before the President Jiang Jingguo(____) lifted the martial law in 1987, there was almost no significant reform in the educational area. The directive document was “Guidelines of the education during the war time and the period of rebuilding the nation period” (__________) published in 1950. Some guidelines and governmental notices came to complement this basic framework for the national education system, later on in the 60’s and 70’s¹, all with the same objective: to design the education – system and curriculum—as a revolutionary tool to conquer the Continent.

And this constitutes the general background of the educational reforms which have been undertaken since the late 1980ies.

Occurring in a very turbulent social context with the lifting of the Martial law, the educational reform was tightly connected with social movements and was pushed for by different interest groups in Taiwanese society, while at the same time being one of the government’s objectives. Accordingly, different groups had different ideas about the reforms to be introduced. The reform that my paper focuses on is the establishment of the Committee on educational reforms in 1994, a semi-private institution yet directly answerable to the Executive Yuan.

The 10 –years of educational reforms in Taiwan are widely criticized as a disaster. To have a better understanding of the global situation, it would be helpful at

first to have an overview on the context in which this educational reform was kicked off, and on the way it became an irrevocable goal of whole society, before going through the main topics tackled by this Committee and the government afterwards (Part I). Then an analysis will be proposed to sift through the changes and continuity of this ongoing struggle under KMT and DPP government especially in the light of the new curriculum policy on the language and social science discipline teaching (Part II).

I. Reform for 10 years...without end

Those who are interested in Taiwan are very well aware that the lifting of the martial law on the 15th of July of 1987 marks a turning point in Taiwan’s history. This was an event of crucial importance not just because it signified the liberalization of Taiwanese people’s thinking after a long period of oppression, for demands for liberalization, by themselves expression of a certain freedom of the mind, had already been made successively during the 1970ies with the clandestine publication of magazines by political protestors, and vociferous conflict protest against the KMT authorities in 1979 after the so-called Formosa Incident. More importantly, the lifting of martial law was a very concrete measure responding directly to people’s demands, and thereby rescuing Taiwan from an eruption of political and social chaos. Paradoxically, it was precisely this threatening social chaos which offered Taiwan a great opportunity for educational reforms.

A) The background of the educational reform

The economic growth, due to expanding international trade along with the expulsion of Taiwan from the international community in the 1970ies, forced Taiwanese people to re-think about themselves. In addition to the persisting dictatorship of the KMT government, social movements of all kinds therefore broke out here and there.

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2 The so-called “Mei li dao shijian” in Chinese. The militants against the KMT’s dictatorship published the Formosa magazine and were arrested in 1979, after demonstrations against the non-respect of the human rights by the KMT government.
Sociological Taiwanese statistics identified about 26 categories of social movements between 1980 and 1992. To mention some of the most important among these, there were movements for consumer protection, environmental protection (1980), protection of the women’s rights, protest by people in the agriculture, political victims’ family leagues, and movements for educational reform (1987), protest against the high cost of housing and the march in honor of the ‘228 incident’ (1989); movements for protecting the minor prostitutes and for cleaning up electoral procedures. (1992) etc.

In conclusion, the educational reform, seen in its historical context, was clearly not independent of other social movements at that time.

1) Educational reform as a part of social movements
The educational reform strictly speaking was already in gestation in the early 1980ies, beginning in the universities’ campuses. The political ‘incident of Zongli’ (1972) and the Formosa Incident (1979) had considerable impact on the climate in the universities, and stirred up the students into thinking about democracy. In 1982 some students of Taiwan University claimed the introduction of universal suffrage of the president of the Association of students, and in 1986 they claimed freedom of expression when encountering sanctions after publishing without approval an article supporting an environmental protection movement. The claim for freedom of expression then expanded in all universities, students expressed their sympathy towards all political protestors and published, largely between March and June of 1987, their respective underground newsletters demanding an amendment of the Law on universities and greater democracy on the campus (for instance, by means of introducing democratic elections of the chancellor of the university, and allowing management of the university by professorial bodies rather than by government)

After the martial law period ended in July 1987, all social groups and movements could suddenly be set up freely and legally. As a consequence, a great number of

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3 Social connection and the power in the educational reform, 2003 Taipei.
4 There was an association of students in each university, and the head of the association was appointed by the government.
5 Demonstration against the establishment of a Dupon factory in Taiwan.
social groups working on educational reform were established in accordance with
the Law on associations. Their efforts may be traced as follows:

- The **sprouting period (1987 to 1988)** is characterized by the birth of
vocational associations with initially different claims and agenda. The first
non-governmental conference on education reform was held in January 1988.
Over 32 social associations participated in the conference and have set an example
for the joint action of associations in the strong stream towards educational reform.

- The **bloom period.** From 1989 to 1993, the educational associations
multiplied in terms of numbers as well as objectives. Some took care of the
improvement of university education (student autonomy, academic liberty,
promoting democracy in the university), others experimented in another
educational sector by founding illegal primary schools. It’s important to note
that a Taiwanese sense of identity was enhanced by the Association of
Taiwan professors(1990), who most importantly were committed to
democracy, social justice, environmental protection and world peace.
The second non-governmental conference on education reform was
organized in 3 sections in 1989. And under the pressure of these
associations, the laws relating to education, such as the law on the
universities, law on the teaching training, law on the teachers, were under
discussion for amending or drafting during this period.

- The **hot period** starts in 1994 and is still ongoing. In April 10 of 1994, a
parade of millions of demonstrators coming from different associations
walked down the streets in Taipei, and later in October the “League for
educational reform 410” was formed, which now gathers over 90 different
associations under its umbrella. They petition for the modernization of the
educational system, for the draw-up of a basic law on the education,
entrenching the principal of “small school small class” and establishing

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7 “Forest school” in 1990, Seeds school 1994 are followed by others schools basing highlighting the importance of the nature and freedom in children’s education.
8 The Association of the Educational Reform of ROC stepping on the League is created in 1997 gathering more than 19 local educational associations.
more high schools and universities. This is the first joint action taken by educational associations, and may be considered as a kind of ultimatum to the government for speeding up the reform process. As a result of these stormy protests and demands, the Committee on educational reform was created by the Executive Yuan in July 1994, a semi-private institution in charge of consultations with and suggestion made to the government.

2) Educational reform as an outcome of the social movements

Under the martial law, the authoritarian governance of KMT oppressed the developing social movement, but did not uproot a forging civil society. If the political incidents of 1970’s generated a political society, and the state led economic growth and different financial institutions (Agricultural Association and cooperative agencies) produced an economic society, the “convergence of these two phenomena prepared the coming of a civil society”. 9

In the 1980’s, the industrial relocation of Taiwanese enterprises to south-east Asia because of the lower labor cost provoked unemployment in waves as well the industrial production transformation. Employees then unified to protect their labor rights and some others gathered trying to prevent the environment form the industrializing disaster. The social movements at that time were more of economic aspect. However, the economic claim also implied a demand of an equitable distribution of resources10, which in fact was fighting for the adjustment of the relationship between government authorities and society.

Since what the educational reformers claimed was based on the logic of an equitable distribution of educational resources of the budget in different regions, the chance for everybody to learn, the educational reform may be in this sense understood as one of the consequences of the general appeal on an more equitable distribution and social justice of the whole society translated by different movements.

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9 The structural analysis of the educational reform projects in Taiwan after the lifting of the martial law in 1987, 2000.
10 Xiao Xinhuang, in The emerging social movements in Taiwan, 1989.
However, how was the government trying to meet the demand of the reformers? The precise way in which the Committee on educational reform was established as a semi-private institution, and the content of consultative reports it published at different stages can tell us what the government’s intentions were with regard to educational reform.

B) Contents of the educational reform

Counting from September 1994, the reform task, and parallel to it the associations’ efforts were taken care of by the Committee on educational reform directly under the Executive Yuan ‘s responsibility and by the Ministry of national education, both endeavoring to respond to the claim of the social groups. The Committee played a particularly important and special role, sometimes in collaboration and sometimes in competition with the Ministry of national education.

As a grouping of experts with different specialties, the Committee is a temporary organic bridge between the government and the social groups. Mr. LI Yuanzhe (___), the Director of the Academia Sinica, Nobel prize winner in physics was in charge of the Committee, and was challenged about his competence in the educational field. Although some still impute the unsatisfying outcome of the reform to Lee’s incapability\(^{11}\), the Final Consultative Report submitted to the Executive Yuan remains the main reference for the pursuit of the educational reform undertaken by the government up to now.

1) Priorities set down by the Final Report of 1996

In an attempt to bridge the differences between the government and private associations on social reforms, the Final Consultative Report of December 1996 repeats the main appeals of the League 410 (1994) and it lists five main objectives of educational reform in Taiwan:  
- To release the education, taking off the incorrect control on the education;  
- To develop an educational system suitable for every student;

\(^{11}\) He is then obliged to publish a defense articles of over one million words on March 4, 2004, stating that the directions were correct but the reform methods were not well decided.
- Offer new opportunities to advance studies;
- Improve the education quality;
- To create social conditions favourable to study throughout the citizens’ lives, with special attempts to provide continuing education in later life.

As the Committee was a consultative organ, all its suggestions had to be supported and carried out by the government, which remained in control of the distribution of educational resources.

The Committee accomplished its mission with the publication of the Final Consultative Report, and was dissolved in 1996 according to plan. The Ministry of national education took back the reins in terms of the programming and the execution of the reform agenda.

As mentioned above, one of the aspects of the educational reform is the equitable resources distribution, so the budgeting is in this sense essential for the success of the reform projects. However, in July 1997 the National Assembly derogated from the article 146 of the Constitution, which guarantees a certain minimum educational and cultural budget. In September, a historical strike named “Rescue education, science and culture”, united teachers and students and all educational associations active on the Island at the time. The Prime Minister Vincent Xiao was obliged to promise to respect the minimum budget guarantee.

Moreover, in the past both the Committee and the private associations were not eligible to work on the budgeting in relation to their proposals. After the incident of September 1997, the Government could not any more affirm its determination to carry on the reform by the stereotyped statements, but to budget for diverse projects. The Action Plan was then published in May 1998 engaging especially the government to release about 4 billion USD in 5 years (1999-2004) to conduct the educational reform.

Once the main topics of the Final Report were included in the Action Plan and itemized in the budget, and once their financing had been secured, we could look forward to an implementation of reform projects responding to what was expected of educational reform in society. Yet, not only was the actual implementation of reforms
not as smooth as one could expect, for various reasons\textsuperscript{12}, but also the new administration of DPP comes to follow some of the policies of the KMT against which they had fought while in opposition.

II. Ongoing struggle: change and continuity in the educational reform policies

The educational reforms began under KMT rule, as we have seen, were largely the result of the activities of private associations. The KMT administration tried hard to meet the demands of the whole society and considered the educational reform as a task of great importance and urgency. When the reform plan entered the final materialization phase in the late 1990ies, DPP ascended the presidency and hoisted educational reforms as also one of the priorities of the new administration. The reform projects were kept going, but seemed to take an interesting turn especially in the area of designing the curriculum for schools.

A) Political tool: an intention never changed

Any educational reform shall imply the curriculum design, especially in Taiwan where the omni-present ideological confrontations could have an influence on that. The “Guidelines on the curriculum for 9-years of state school education”\textsuperscript{13} published on 30 September 1998, followed the suggestions of the Final Report of 1996 in insisting on the openess, the coherence and the integration for the design of the courses from the primary school to junior high school. The “standard curriculum” (\textit{\_\_\_\_\_kind of set curriculum}) of KMT style was metamorphosed into a “guidance of curriculum” (\textit{\_\_\_\_}), subjected to the guideline requirements of the DPP type. The government no longer had a monopoly on what reading materials were to be used, for instance. Different companies in line with the guidelines defining seven

\textsuperscript{12} We have to mention that the quick turnover of the Minister of the education could largely explain the interruption of certain projects, and of course the blaming result of the reform.

\textsuperscript{13} The national education has been extended from 6 years to 9 years in 1968; and the Law on the national education of 1979 defined that the education was compulsory for the children from 6 to 15 years old.
learning fields now edited Reading materials. Among these fields, the language guidelines and guidelines for citizenship education is of the greatest significance to the present discussion.

1) Politicization of language teaching by the KMT as well as by the DPP

Under KMT rule Chinese Mandarin was the sole language taught at school. During the 1970ies, the campaign for “speaking the national language” was a part of school life, one could be punished just for saying one word in Taiwanese.

The DPP’s administration, taking into account the ethnic diversity in Taiwan and the origins of its own party, experimented with multi-language teaching. In March 2002, the Minister of the national education Mr.Huang Rongcun, in an ordinary parliamentary hearing session in front of the representatives of the Legislative Yuan intimated for the first time that besides Chinese mandarin, the dialects of Heluo (Taiwanese is a branch of Heluo), Haka and aboriginals shall be all regarded as national languages, and shall be officially taught at school. Such a simple answer, given in the context of a parliamentary inquiry, became the policy of the reform regarding language teaching and languages to be taught. However, the proper procedures for policy-making had not been respected.

From this point of view, language teaching as an essential part of the education in Taiwan is used both by the KMT and DPP administrations as a political tool of the Party, of which the goal is the integration—not in the cultural manner-- of the country.

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14 They are languages, society, health & sport, art & human sciences, mathematics, science & technology and divers activities.
15 Publication of the Ministry of the education “Report on the Project of the national languages” 2002
16 No laws at that time stipulated the equality of the different dialects in the language teaching at schools.
Indeed, the KMT strictly regulated that Chinese mandarin was the only language to be spoken “at school, in governmental offices and public places”\(^{17}\), and this was without a doubt using the language in an authoritarian way as a tool to exercise control and realize the political purpose of future re-unification with the Mainland. Arguably, when we look at the language policy under DPP’s administration, we find evidence of the same intention to politicize the language teaching and learning.

As DPP presented itself as a Taiwan rooted party, it had to respect Taiwanese dialect; but in order to take care of the social stability necessary for the scrutiny, it has no choice but to treat equally all existing dialects of different ethnicities. Legislation on the equal status of all dialects spoken in Taiwan, should be made and integrated with the languages curriculum. Therefore, there is little concern about the actual need or the feasibility of teaching such dialects, especially as the dialects are supposed to be the mother tongue which by definition need not be learned at school.\(^{18}\) Either, there’s no care about the connection of language-culture-education, but a real political logic on the linkage of politics-language-power. Just like KMT insisted on teaching in Chinese mandarin for its political purposes, the DPP government continues also to provide for so-called “mother-tongue teaching” at school, in order to keep a socio-political balance.

2) Authoritarian educational mechanisms

Apart from the particular issue of teaching languages in schools, we may also notice that the DPP continues authoritarian styles of governance – though perhaps to a lesser degree – in the field of the curriculum policy.

According to the principle of an open curriculum design for the primary school and junior high school, allowing for some degree of choice, the system of “the guidance for multiple editions”\(^{(____)}\) shall replace the former standardized school books. In practice, the publishing companies of the school textbooks are required to submit to the Ministry of education their respective edition for examination and approval. The publishers, in order to be allowed to sell the textbooks to schools,

\(^{17}\) Official Journal of the Government of the Province of Taiwan, 1951 and 1976.

\(^{18}\) In the mountain region, there could be up to 9 ethnics in a primary school of less than 100 students, and according to the “policy” the students have to learn 9 dialects.
should then adjust or modify their versions in accordance with the advice of the ministry examiners, who have compiled -their own referencing textbooks in advance. So, the “examined and approved textbook” takes the place of the “standard textbook”\(^\text{19}\), and there is most times just a difference in order of chapters among textbooks supplied by different publishers. In such cases, we cannot help asking if the uniform way of thinking and teaching that the DPP used to fight against has really been relegated to the past.

The DPP always advocates the respect cultural diversity and differences. Such respect for differences should not be understood as a mere distribution of market-shares to different textbook publishers, but as respect for different ways to present things. If at the end, according to the new curriculum, pupils are studying the examined and approved, and in truth quite uniform textbooks in school, then we appear to be left with a very unclear distinction between the dictatorial KMT style, and the semi-totalitarian government of the DPP at least so far as uniformity of thinking in education goes.

**B) Different approaches**

According to suggestions above, history, geography and citizenship courses are integrated into classes on social topics. The approach to these classes, and the objectives to be reached, also reflect changes in the political outlooks of the respective Taiwanese governments.

1) **Civil society vis-à-vis of the political society**

If the national education system run by the KMT during 50 years focused on collective values, especially about the supreme value of nation, DPP’s government on the contrary, desires to highlight the value of the individual as a human being.

If one of the characteristics of the general classes on social topics under the KMT’s reign is the emphasis of the instillation of patriotism and the importance of a political society, the approach adopted by the DPP government is to imbue the pupils with the democracy and the role of the civil society.

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\(^{19}\) Essays on 9-year consecutive and coherent curriculum conference, Ministry of the education, 1999.
At primary school, the pupils now learn about ME: who I am, I am unique, I and others (family, school and the residential community…), they also learn about their home town (history, folk culture, economic and social activities…) and about Taiwan’s geography.

From 12 years old, they begin lessons on Taiwan’s history and social life and from around 14 years old they study Chinese history and geography. They are also supposed to study the culture of the Chinese community and world culture (including world history and geography) with the stress of the differences in political systems and the development towards democracy in many countries.

The textbooks advocate respect in the general sense and human rights. And social problems are treated in a way bringing out the role of different associations and social movements in society, including the function of such as demonstrations as a right of citizens to bring changes in society.

2) Different Taiwanese identities?
As already mentioned, according to the newly designed curriculum, Taiwan’s history and geography are treated separately from the Chinese history and geography. It might not be possible for the teachers to avoid the identity question in class, especially as the great majority of the teachers are educated along the lines of KMT political thought. In the old days, the history and the geography subjects under the curriculum policy of KMT government considered Taiwan’s history as a part of the Chinese history and treated Taiwan’s geography as the geographical presentation of just another Chinese province.

The new approach under DPP rule is radically different, and teachers have to think of, or at least speak of, Taiwan as the Republic of China on Taiwan or even of Taiwan as a sovereign and independent country. This ambivalence on national identity reflects actually the general ambiguity of the whole Taiwanese society.

6-year-old pupils now start to learn Mandarin Chinese and at the same one (or more) of the dialects of Taiwan, and they learn first about their hometowns – which are in Taiwan. And then they are initiated into the history and geography of Taiwan.

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20 We should honestly make difference between the KMT under Jiang Jingguo’s administration and Lee Tenghui’s, also separate the different periods under Lee Tenghui’s government.
as a separate country. Accordingly, China could be just another country in their eyes, as much foreign as any other.

Would the new curriculum under DPP rule be reinforcing a sense of Taiwanese identity as a new national identity, or would it be a new way of looking at Taiwanese identity in an evolutionary relationship across the Straits?

Conclusion

Almost none of the objectives set by the Committee of 1994 have been reached during the past ten years: students still live under devastating examination pressure, teachers never received adequate training on the newly designed curriculum, and the quality of tertiary education is even deteriorating because of increasing numbers in universities. In a poll conducted by the Association of Teachers in early March 2004, more than 90% of the teachers interviewed qualified the education reforms as a failure.

Yet, the failures cannot be attributed to the contents in themselves of reform projects. Taiwan was governed under martial law for almost 40 years, and education during that period was seen as a mere tool for re-building the country and eventual re-unification. So, since the 1980ies, educational reforms did to not only have to remedy educational institution problems, but also have to release Taiwan’s people from a very rigid way of thinking. Therefore, the reforms projects, already very complex in themselves, are interlinked with political, social, and cultural factors.

And what is really important is the active attitude of the DPP government regarding the pursuit of reforms. In contrast to the the KMT government which, despite a general awareness of the need for educational reform, became active largely only

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21 Before the reform, students in Taiwan had to succeed in the competitive examination for studying in high school and in universities. Despite such an examination is taken off by the reform, the diversity and complexity of new system, which is supposed not to be so selective, does not unfortunately release the students from the pressure.

22 In response to the reform project for creating more universities, the requirements on equipment et student numbers of setting a private university are much looser, the quality is therefore deteriorating.

because it was put under pressure by the various associations mentioned above, the DPP administration took responsibility for the reform of its own free will.

The project on the White Book on Education published on the 2nd of April 2004, shortly after the re-election of DPP to the presidency shows the very firm support of the government on educational reforms. It is expected above all to work out a new system for the admission in universities and to revise the curriculum policy, which are most criticized by students, parents and teachers.

Since the reforms carried on up to now seem care more about the education in primary school and high school, they now have to be conducted more on the preschool education such as creating more state kindergarten and on the improvement of the university education so as to better the global quality of Taiwan’s education.

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