Taiwan’s “experimental” Indigenous schools: A critical policy analysis

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Abstract

Taiwan’s first female president leveraged the weight of her 2016 landslide electoral victory in order to prioritize an apology and pledge of reparations to Taiwan’s indigenous people. These 16 indigenous minorities, constituting 2% of Taiwan’s total population, wield substantial influence on the island’s overall driving narrative of self-rule. In 2016, the first ever “indigenous experimental school” opened for the Atayal indigenous people. Since that time nearly 30 indigenous experimental schools have opened across the island. This study draws from ethnographic data from these indigenous experimental schools, interviews with those involved with promoting indigenous education development and policy making, as well as critical discourse analysis of curricula and policy. Experimental schools began in 2015 in explicit reference to charter school policy in the United States. They were not introduced with indigenous education in mind. Rather, they were heavily influenced by Waldorf educational philosophies. Indigenous communities have used this recent loosening in educational regulation by opening up “indigenous experimental schools.” These schools are public schools but have more curricular autonomy to devote more time for indigenous education.

This year-long ethnographic study is funded by a Fulbright-Hays dissertation research grant. My research explores emerging educational policies designed for Taiwan’s indigenous people and my research questions are:

1) How does localized control of education within experimental schools function and what makes them substantively different from mainstream options of schooling?

2) Why do some indigenous leaders desire greater autonomy for their education, and what meaning and significance does educational autonomy possess for these communities?

3) What are the consequences for indigenous autonomy of education in these experimental schools?

Under the auspices of this primary focus are three topical considerations:

Autonomy: The conventional push from both national and local levels of governance has been for indigenous groups to have greater autonomy over their own affairs. What are the consequences of this push for autonomy? Indigenous claims for autonomy over their own educational affairs run parallel to education reforms across the island. The symbolic value of Taiwan’s indigenous heritage has been a rallying point for many who wish to distance the island from connections with its Chinese heritage and thereby assert political sovereignty (Chen, 2011; Chang, 2011). The increase of sovereignty and
autonomy for indigenous people over their own communities has been the orthodox and prevailing position for leaders throughout the political spectrum over the last several decades (Stainton, 2007), and indigenous peoples have become increasingly active in asserting their rights regarding self-rule (Mona, 2011). My research addresses a gap in the literature regarding the consequences of autonomy specifically as they relate to education policy for Taiwan’s aborigines. The issue of locus of control over education policy has been a contested topic in the field of comparative education for some time, as notions of local and centralized regulation of education can be quite ambiguous (Bray, 2003). Particularly with regard to marginalized populations, granting local control over education regulation can create gaps of oversight that can leave vulnerable populations even more susceptible to harm through lack of public accountability (Lubienski & Ndimande, 2017). This tension between desiring autonomy from the government, while simultaneously requiring additional public resources to make autonomy viable, has been a challenge for Taiwan’s indigenous communities (Wang, 2014).

Indigeneity: Taiwan’s 16 ethnolinguistic indigenous groups have actively sought connections with and examples from other indigenous groups in Austronesia and North America for models of how to revitalize and perpetuate their own culture. What are the effects of “indigenous” education policy that is inspired in part by broader stimuli of international connections, and concurrently by localized native revitalization? Notions of indigeneity in education policy are somewhat indistinct. Taiwan’s aborigines are actively using examples of indigenous revitalization from abroad in order to inform their own efforts (Mona, 2011). Taiwan’s indigenous people are gaining international connections through evidence that demonstrates Taiwan’s indigenous population to be the ancestral homeland of all Austronesian people (Munsterhjelm, 2014). My study investigates these intersections between the global and the local amidst these recent education policy reforms.

Schooling: Indigenous groups have been the recipients of formal education efforts in their communities for many decades, and some of these efforts were damaging to aboriginal culture and language. What does “education” currently mean to these groups and what do they hope it will accomplish? Schooling and examination procedures had long been used as a tool for governance in Taiwan’s hinterland (Shepherd, 1993). In more recent decades, schools were used as sites of cultural and linguistic eradication, as aboriginal groups endured forced assimilation into Chinese culture (Friedman, 2005). Efforts to revitalize aboriginal education for the betterment of these populations arose concurrently with the island’s shift to democratic rule (Tang, 2002). Therefore, indigenous education and schooling must be regarded with a critical lens so as to ascertain what these groups hope that “educated” people will look like and be able to accomplish (Levinson & Holland, 1996). My research will contribute these studies by addressing the question of what schooling is primarily valued and used for in the context of these recent education initiatives that are being embraced by indigenous communities in Taiwan, and in particular “indigenous experimental” schools.

My methodological research approach draws from the techniques of education policy comparative case studies (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), that regard education “policy as practice” (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009), and asserts that education policies should best be understood and analyzed by how they are used on the ground in different communities. Moreover, my conceptual framework for analyzing education policy implementation relies on the principles of discourse analysis in evaluating language’s effect on social action (Lester, Lochmiller, & Gabriel, 2017; Diem & Young, 2018).