
Curriculum Decision-Making of Administrators in Taiwan Vocational High Schools

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Abstract: Curriculum decision-making is an important task of educational administrator for it should include all of the decision-making procedures of curriculum development. Presently, the policy inclination of vocational education is to delegate the decision-making rights of curriculum, while the Ministry of Education (MOE) should merely be responsible for stipulating curriculum, review curriculum plan, and provide resources in the future. If school administrator is willing to dwarf itself as merely the follower of curriculum without the capability to design curriculum and willingness to make change, the objective to achieve school-based curriculum is simply impossible.

In 2002, school-based curriculum has begun to be experimented in five vocational high schools. As of such, there would be less difficulty in school-based curriculum for the administrators of these five schools, and there are some schools which find it strenuous to set up curriculum decision-making mechanism. As a matter of course, factors behind the sign should deserve our attention. The study is based on the administrators of these five vocational high schools as its targets, while interviews are employed to appreciate the ideas of “curriculum decision-making” of administrators after the reform. As for the implementation of the “curriculum decision-making” strategy, it is as well the focus of this research, and the study should end with its interview results and literature comparison.

Keywords: Vocational High School, Curriculum Reform, Curriculum decision-making, Principal, Educational Administrator, school-based curriculum

In recent years, the value of existence of vocational education is facing large-scale pressure of modification as of fast changing of industrial structure. In order to take care of career development for vocational high school students as well as to link up vertically and horizontally with the planning of vocational high school curriculum, it is necessary that new curriculum for vocational high school has to be developed. For only doing so, it would help

students of vocational high school to cope with the trends of continuous education as well as job-placement, also it can also help them to equip them with capabilities to adapt to future life and work. Nonetheless, since there is rather great diversity of curriculum in each vocational high school as of its department layout, or development approach, or regional factors, the level of students, and career development vary tremendously, as a result, the design of curriculum has to render sufficient autonomy for schools or curriculum designed won't accommodate to the diverse needs of individual requirements of students.

Since vocational high school in Taiwan can barely have any right for its own decision-making in the past, all of these schools can but follow the curriculum structure released by MOE, while completely in lack of any right of decision-making in its curriculum. With the trend of educational democratization in recent years, MOE has started, from 2001, to push for reforms in vocational high school and promote the project of "new curriculum for vocational education" The project is intended to release most of the decision-making rights of curriculum to school, in the hope that school is able to furnish the development of school-based curriculum. Since school administrator is, for quite a long time, short of the awareness for autonomous curriculum, the reform should, definitely, create tremendous impact on all of the vocational high schools as these administrators have less than enough professional capability with regard to the design of curriculum goal and content.

In comparison of the rigid curriculum structure of grammar high school, the curriculum structure of vocational high school in its previous several reforms has been expanded in steps to provide features of greater selections and adaptability. However, since administrator and vocational high school teacher have, for a long time, not been involved in the participation of curriculum planning, their knowledge remains inadequate with regard to the design of school-based curriculum for each school in view of the mastery of educational objective as well as model of curriculum development (Hsiao, T. C., & Chen, M. N., 2005). In the new vocational curriculum, credit stipulated for graduation will be lowered, while subject re-adjusted will amount to 40% to 50% (including compulsory and selective courses) and department classification should be reduced to seven categories, seventy subjects, and seventeen clusters. The focus of the vocational high school reform is to reduce the classification of compulsory and selective courses, which should render significant impact on vocational high school.

In contrast to grammar high school, the hierarchy system of vocational high school is much more prominent for the positioning of "subject" or "cluster" concerns crucial issues as faculty integration of school and curriculum (Chang, C. L., 2002). Besides, in the survey done among teachers by Rau et al (1996) some interviewees consider there is strong

provincialism among technical courses as well as that of technical courses with academic courses, and it would be hard to coordinate to achieve curriculum target. Therefore, “the right of curriculum decision-making” is more than just complex, and that would require experienced administrator who knows vocational high school curriculum goal. Administrators indicated by this research include vocational high school principal, vice principal for academic affairs, and each department head, while other administration personnel and teachers part-timing as administrator are excepted.

In fact, there is much noise against reform within several departments. According to the study by Lin (1994), most of the curriculum planners believe that vocational education should be targeted at job-placement, seconded by continuous education. However, most teachers consider that continuous education curriculum should act to exclude professional courses. As a matter of fact, teachers of vocational high school, on one hand, recognize the importance of enhancing the academic capability of students, while they are also concerned the fact of insufficient hours of instruction as stipulated (Wu, T. M., 2002; Rau, et al, 1996).

Decision-making of curriculum refers to an individual, a group of individuals, a group, or an organization that chooses the best alternative from several ones during the processes of curriculum planning, design, implementation or evaluation. Since “decision-making of curriculum” matters the accomplishment of instruction content of teacher, learning effect of student, and educational objective, it plays rather critical role in the entire education. In fact, there is reason that administrators are concerned for the reform. From the questionnaire conducted by Ni (2001) on vocational education, it is found that after the implementation of new curriculum of vocational high school, bi-polarized development of school-based curriculum is observed; curriculum structure is mostly inclined to continuous education, and less towards job-placement approach, while there are hardly schools that would provide diversified courses that adapt to the development of students. Theoretically, teachers in vocational high school are expected to be equipped with fast changing ability to adapt to environment; however, in reality, substantial researches in the country indicate that they remain short of such capability (Wu, T. M., 2002; Liu, M. T., 2002). Besides, “decision making of curriculum” is not merely a simple issue of education; it would oftentimes be affected by political ideology, social changes, and interest groups. Since it is not entirely a professional and educational decision but outcome of political consultation, it has rendered “decision-making of curriculum” even more sophisticated.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the notions and strategy transformation of “decision-making of curriculum” of school administrators, autonomous development of school and the content of decision-making of curriculum, the extent of school administrator in the

participation of decision-making of curriculum of school, and the critical issues that affect the decision-making of curriculum by school faculty. At the end, conclusions and recommendations would be concluded at the end to be cited as reference for practice and research for the decision-making of curriculum for vocational high school. In literatures review, decision-making of curriculum and curriculum reform in vocational high school will be taken as its basic elaboration. To view the decision-making of curriculum from the perspective of school hierarchy, school environment will be the context that cannot be avoided, while factors as decision-maker, interpersonal interaction, and the methodology of decision-making should be involved in the decision-making of curriculum content, approach, and method of organization.

The notions and strategy transformation of present stage curriculum decision-making as well as authority delegation of curriculum implementation places high regard at the development of school-based curriculum. Therefore, school is authorized to develop school-based curriculum, while administrator has, upon existing foundation, to create render the objective and process of curriculum reform, adjust organizational structure of curriculum decision-making, and establish such organizational culture of learning mode in school to achieve school-based curriculum development. In review of the school-based curriculum development, it remains much intervened by multiple factors, including external environment, school system, and qualifications of teachers, which deserve further investigation. As an overview of the preceding points of discussions, this study will take high-ranking administrators of these five vocational high schools as its targets of research, and make use of literature review and in-depth interview to explore these ranking administrators in the implementation of this school-based curriculum and the status quo of curriculum decision-making by school administrators.

Status quo of curriculum development in vocational high school

The team, made up of personnel from MOE, curriculum development center, curriculum development committee, and comprehensive planning section, will work on the formulation of curriculum outline according to the alternatives derived from the studies, above-mentioned planning principles, and decisions determined during the process. Each curriculum development center, based on its responsibility cluster, should proceed with the assignments of consultation, communication, coordination, and connection. In 2002, MOE will choose several vocational high schools to conduct school-based curriculum simulation based on the draft of curriculum outline, while “technical and vocational curriculum” will officially be implemented by 2006.

In technical and vocational curriculum, they are classified as general course and specialized course according to its nature, compulsory and selective course according to

latitude and particularity, and “ministry-stipulated curriculum” and “school-stipulated curriculum” according to the body that stipulates. However, the latitude and body of stipulation of courses should vary according to core curriculum of subjective cluster and developmental curriculum. And problems that technical and vocational curriculum would face are:

1. As of class reduction of practice subject, some teachers and students are worried that it would affect their learning of skill, and they are concerned if they can obtain license successfully as well as difficulty finding job after graduation.
2. The number of student for opening selective course is set at 25. If the school is of one class for subject department, it would have to combine two to three departments before such selective course is available. However, should it be stipulated that the selective course has to be of the original class and deny class combination, it would be uneasy for the school to have selective courses.
3. There are no appropriate teaching materials for the selective courses of school-based curriculum. Some of the existing curriculum has to be planned and designed as compulsory or selective courses, but teachers have to face the issues of self-made teaching materials, over-cost of teaching materials, and complexity of revision and modification of teaching materials if school-based curriculum is largely increased. Besides, they also have to deal with the problems of assessment and student adaptation.
4. School-based curriculum is helpful to the integration of departmental subjects within school; however, it would highlight the relative complexity of subject connection among schools, and if the trend of senior high and vocational high school turns for community heads on, it would further affect the connection problem among schools as they arrange selection curriculum.
5. In the past, schools have held many training events for teacher expertise in coping with curriculum adjustment of vocational high school. In the future, the problems of teachers should likely to face with inadequate expertise and have no class for instruction as of curriculum adjustment. Among, the reduction of instruction hours for social science and physical education might render some teachers with the dilemma of unable to entertain the minimal instruction hours stipulated.

The content of *curriculum decision-making* by school administrator

Presently, the administration hierarchy system of vocational high school “principal – director of academic affairs – department head” internally, in comparison to grammar high school, is more liable to create multi-level of conflict and problems. For instance, some vocational high schools take regular courses highly, while some consider these regular courses are obstacle to the development of professional expertise; since each has its own

special, it renders some interesting negotiation as it defends its own interests (Chang, C. L., 2002). When discussing “decision-making of curriculum,” most of the literatures are found on the decision-making of curriculum by teachers, and there is hardly any research done about decision-making of curriculum by administrator. Under present context of organization and system, the role-play of administrator is fuzzy and vague, which has affected their “decision-making right of curriculum,” and it can especially be observed in the development of school-based curriculum. Such fuzzy role-play is, in practice, influenced by several factors, and the content of the curriculum decision-making in vocational high school will be discussion in the following:

1. Responsibility of administrator

School administrator refers to the internal leadership of vocational high school, therefore, Brown, Rutherford & Boyle (2000) believe that the responsibility of school administrators includes: improvement of culture within the department, improvement project of department development, setting down criteria for instruction quality, professional development of instructor, and allocation of resources appropriately. As for curriculum development, Lee & Dimmock (1999) consider that the tasks of school administrator include: course arrangement, disciplining of student, allocation of human resources, class arrangement of students, supervision of courses, renovation of course, morale stimulation, establishment of faculty team, problem shooting, and professional development. Zepeda et al., (2003) reckons that the responsibility of school administrator embraces: integrate school working calendar and time-table of semester, management of department budget, management of equipment and factory, preparation of meetings within department, working as professionals as curriculum content, development of curriculum guide, mastery of student allocation, establishment of responsibility performance, and production of report with needs enlisted.

2. Determination of curriculum goal

The decision-making of curriculum is a political activity in order to reform power structure that existing manipulates school system, in other words, power and control have to re-distributed to ensure that the voices of instructor can be heard; however, it is not taking one voice suppressing the others (Au, Y. S., 2004). Our country has, since 2000, begun to implement new curriculum for technical and vocational system, and a great deal of the development rights for curriculum are delegated to schools, therefore, administrators of vocational high school enjoy significant latitude in curriculum development. Nonetheless, these administrators have to be equipped with capability of curriculum leadership, or curriculum leadership can never have achieved what is expected. The curriculum of vocational high school should take care of the needs of students who like to further their studies as well as to focus on job-placement; therefore, the planning of curriculum should be

done focusing on the development features of school to designate its objective. Objective management is a kind of philosophy, and school administrator would first have to locate common and individual objective to define its criteria of success, and further evaluate the extent of its objective achievement (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004).

3. Establishment of democratic mechanism for curriculum decision-making

It is pointed out by Henderson (1999) that firm democratic ethic principles provide “curriculum decision-making” a solid structure of framework, and these ethic principles includes: (1) seek for and introduce each and every instructor method that supports authentic learning of investigation; (2) seek for and introduce each and every curriculum development that supports instructor guidance; (3) seek for methods that re-organize organization and structure; (d) seek for meaningful “school – community” dialog method for establishment in the process of transformation. Organization culture is critical for school that seeks for progress, and the role-play of culture is oftentimes ignored in the educational leadership in the past; however, it has been given with much regard lately (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Since process of curriculum decision-making is often influenced by organization culture (Preedy, 2002), thus the impact of organization culture on curriculum is unspeakably important, and the establishment of democratic decision-making of curriculum if as well the mission of the administrator.

Methodology

The objects of interview include five case schools, which are respectively as industrial, commercial, domestic science, agriculture, and marine life school, given with their wide scope of diversity, they are quite representative for survey. Among them, four of them are experimental schools under technical and vocational system curriculum of MOE, while the other one is conducting its curriculum planning within the school under the context of research project, and they have been well equipped with rich experience of practical operation in terms of curriculum development regarding the new curriculum. In order to have more in-depth observation and elaboration of the status quo of curriculum decision-making of school, this research employs qualitative method of research, and chooses these five vocational high schools as its targets of research, while the processes of curriculum decision-making are taken as the points of observation. The notions of curriculum decisions-making of school administrators are elaborated with depth, and so as the relevant and compatible measures to curriculum reform. Though this study is founded with its basic discourse, but it won't limit itself within; on the other hand, it will, after long-term observation to conclude several observation and analysis aspects, describe and analyze the network scenario of curriculum decision-making, the extent of participation by administrator in curriculum decision-making, operation mechanism of curriculum decision-making of

school, aspect of curriculum decision-making of school, and factors that affect the curriculum decision-making of administrator of actual development of curriculum development in these five schools.

The three principals interviewed serve in the vocational high first schools as instructors, and have worked as directors for academic affairs for years. Therefore, they are well equipped with comprehensive program and instruction experiences. Before taking up the position as principal, they have served at least in school for more than 15 years, and are rich in administrative experience. Besides, the five directors interviewed in this study are well equipped with instruction experiences, and are, as an average, have been acting as director for at least 4.5 years, and have abundant experiences both in educational administration and teaching. Since the researcher and interviewees have been involved in curriculum reform of vocational high school for a long time, therefore, the issue of gap of understanding on academic term and language is hardly existent during the interview. Besides, weeks before the interview of these individuals for this research we have collect information and data of the schools for interview to help our understanding objective knowledge of these schools.

After the end of the interview, we have, first transcribed the content into statement word by word, and content code and analyzed, concluded opinions from each of the interviewees. The ways of interview and information arrangement are: when an interviewee is done of interview, we will at once transcribe the tape word by word, and conduct information analysis. After communication with research and assisting coding personnel with the scope of research, we will, by order, conduct two information coding by two coding personnel. After coding is done, the information obtained will be classified and correlated, and coded attributes of similar nature are classified. Then based on the information analysis method of Miles & Huberman (1994), the information will be organized, and classified and arranged into research results accordingly.

Conclusion

1. According to the concluded result of interviews, the notion of “curriculum decision-making” of vocational high school can be classified as: “seeing student as the subjectivity,” and “respect teacher in the decision-making right of curriculum.” As of the common view shared in the relevant literatures, the most important responsibility of administrator is to establish the democratic culture of curriculum development which tantamount to the notion of “respect instructor in the decision-making right of curriculum.” Besides, interviewees the viewpoint about “seeing student as the subjectivity” is as well the extension of democracy. Just as Lee & Dimmock (1999) and Zepeda et al., (2003) have indicated, administrator has to master the needs of students in learning; Brown et al (2000)

believe that administrator should set establish performance responsibility system which evolve with the notion that student being the center of focus.

2. The strategy of “curriculum decision-making” of administrator in vocational high school can be found as: “encouragement professional growth of instructor,” “making good use of conference communication,” and “coagulate school consensus.” Of the one “coagulate school consensus,” it is much in common with the ideas as “stimulation of morale, establishment of team,” and “improvement of curriculum development culture” put forth by Brown and Lee. Besides, when interviewees mention “encouragement professional growth of teacher,” it is much in common with that as administrator should facilitate professional development of teacher as put forth by Brown & Lee. Last, interviewees should “make good use of conference communication” is tantamount to that put forth by Zepeda which claims that administrator should constant sponsor program conference.

3. The present stage curriculum decision-making will determine role-play transformation which is inherent with political manipulation: the authority of school-based curriculum is not only limited by the hierarchy, but in realty power structure of school itself. Based on the interview results, the idea of principal will oftentimes affect the curriculum decision-making right of teachers. Besides, the power structure between the principal and the vice principal for academic affair also affect if the strategy of curriculum decision-making will work. As a whole, the coordination among administrators should impact the comprehensiveness of facilitating curriculum reform, and their interaction impacts on the willingness of participation of teachers. Moreover, school ethics internally should largely impinge on the readiness of instructor taking part in the decision-making of curriculum. Actually, there remains a large gap between the ideal of school administrators delegating teacher to decide their curriculum based on the interview results.

4. The curriculum decision-making mechanism affect the quality of this school-based curriculum: most of the theme-based planning for the entire whole can be done integrating activity course of students from each school year. Of which, it does not involve textbooks of each subject, but because academic knowledge structure of various versions of textbooks is hard to link up, teaching experience of teachers vary a lot, teaching faculty from each school year share diverse interaction, and there is limited time for teachers to discussion; as a result, the content of knowledge of various subjects would be hard to conduct consistent course organization. Furthermore, instructors of vocational high school are used to their independent core for each subject program to establish featured school-based curriculum. Nonetheless, since the dialog among each of the department at present stage is not yet established and borderline between subject knowledge remains, there is greater difficult ahead to develop

school-based curriculum now than that of elementary and middle school.

5. Complicated factors that affect school administrators in curriculum decisions-making: they include multiple sources of curriculum decision-making, the scope of curriculum decision-making of school administrator limited, the leadership of administrator affecting the willingness of teacher to take part in the curriculum decision-making, operation mechanism of school curriculum decision-making affecting the chance of teacher taking part in curriculum decision-making, group interaction of curriculum decision-making affecting the content of the curriculum decision-making, and the school organization culture affecting the result of teacher implementing the decision-making of curriculum. At the end, individual background of teachers should affect their commitment to the decision-making of curriculum. In order to establish democratic decision-making of curriculum, administrators should facilitate teachers to move forwards the culture of professional development.

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