

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Micro-political analysis of the principal selection in a Taiwanese elementary school**

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**This paper aims to investigate the micropolitical actions and strategies employed by the principal in the researched elementary school located in Northern Taiwan. Firstly, the author argues that the mechanism of the principal selection in Taiwan is the product of educational reform affected by policy borrowing. Secondly, drawing on ethnographic method the study illustrates the micropolitical dynamics of principal selection among the principal candidate, administrators and teachers. The research findings show that several micropolitical actions during the principal selection had been revealed, including the principal candidate seeking for internal teachers' support, political competition between the principal candidate and the director in charge of academic affairs, building up guanxi from parents in the local community, and Confucian campus ethics as a major factor influencing the consequence of the principal selection.**

**Key words:** Micropolitics, principal selection, political competition, guanxi, Confucian ethics.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In 1999, the revised Compulsory Education Act in Taiwan changed the procedures of principalship appointment and selection. One of the essential regulations was to change the appointment of principalship by the local educational authority and dilute this 'old-fashioned' approach of selecting principals. The more concrete procedure of principal selection was to legislate parental involvement in the internal decision-making processes of the school to select the prospective candidate(s). The procedures of selecting principals in Taiwan, the authors argue, could 'borrow' from other countries' experiences, such as British practice (Morgan et al., 1983; Morgan et al., 1984), but with some changes. This was the first time to allow parental involvement in the mechanism for selecting and appointing principals in Taiwan. The second step of selecting principalship was to send the list to the local

educational authorities who organized the principal selection committee composed of local educational officers, parental representatives, teacher delegates and educational experts or scholars (Walker, 2002: 130). Generally, principal selection is described as a process rather than as an event. As a process, selection involves at least two separate but related decisional stages that need to satisfy to local schoolteachers and parents as well as the LEA. The first stage is to select the prospective candidate who needs to be recommended by the school-based selection committee; then the second stage involves interviewing the prospective candidate by the LEA's principal selection committee. If the prospective candidate was satisfactorily accepted by both the school's and the LEA's selection committees, his four-year term would be secure and his appointment would be by the local paramount, such as the mayor or the county magistrate. Once appointed, the successful candidate would be given a tenured position in

a specific school and could remain in his post for a four-year period.

With the implementation of the principal selection policy, two requirements could be seen as conflicting: the need for impartial technical assessment methods to gather the evidence of candidate fitness for principalship, and the need to satisfy demands for a visible democratic accountability and social legitimation by the local community (Morgan et al., 1983). Particularly, the parent representatives are involved in selection for two reasons. The first is to legitimate the selective procedure, which they can do by overseeing and being involved in the assessment procedure; the second aspect of parental involvement is to consent to the appointment on behalf of the school's local community (Morgan et al., 1984: 20).

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a case-study ethnographic approach, via participant observation, interviews and collecting written documents, in order to portray the 'realistic' picture of school micropolitics in terms of the principal selection. The case school, the principal, teachers and senior staff, and events were purposively sampled. This research employed the case-study approach to investigate a Taiwanese elementary school, Hillside, as the fieldwork site. The school was chosen because it afforded an opportunity to explore the micropolitics of principal selection in context that are highly politicized in the urban setting. This school was located in northern Taiwan, and composed of 48 classes, about 1500 pupils and 100 staff. It had been established for more than eighty years. The principal was on the leadership of this school for around four years and seeking for the next tenure.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Internal teachers' support*

In order to meet the need of the second requirement and to conduct a preliminary survey of the prospective candidate, the school may gather teachers' and parental votes and make sure the prospective candidate would be satisfactorily sent for further assessment by the LEA's principal selection committee. At Hillside, the school organized a school principal selection committee which was composed of the representatives of senior staff, teachers and parents. According to the former DD (the director in charge of pupil discipline):

*Based on the survey of teachers' perspective on the present principal's leadership by the Hillside teachers' association, it revealed that the present principal gained a great deal of support from most of our school teachers. During the meeting of the school principal selection committee, I reported this result to parent representatives (they were the president and two vice presidents of Hillside parental association), who apparently had the power of decision of the prospective candidate, according to the rules of principal selection. At last, they all agreed to*

*send the present principal to enter the second-round at the local government.*

Borrowing from Goffman's dramatology, Gronn (1999) describes that the selection interview as a quasi-dramatic performance of 'body language stuff' (p. 163):

*Applicants for leadership vacancies are in a position of being on show and displaying their prospective wares in a selection interview and it is frequently on the basis of such impressions that predictive judgements about leadership capacity are made (ibid.).*

He further maintains that, based on the anthropological perspective, the procedure of principal selection could be seen as 'a status passage':

*[During the selection interview] a candidate's career leadership aspirations and status were being either confirmed or disconfirmed. From an appointee's point of view, the conferral of her/his new status can be viewed as analogous to a rite of passage, an event ... making the transition or crossing-over from one identity to another (ibid.)*

Judging from Gronn's analysis of principal selection interview, such a procedure can be seen as a career movement or continuity of prospective principals. The consequence of career shift or consecution is related to individual's sense of career security or career advancement (Kearl and Hoag, 1984) if he/she is appointed successfully by the selection committee.

### *'Political' competition*

Yet, according to the interviews with the school members, most of them maintained that the procedure of principal selection was significantly 'political'. It could be traced to one staff meeting in which the present principal stated that he was considering leaving this school and announced that the director of academic affairs (DAA) could, perhaps, be the succeeding principal. The principal's statement had evoked members' whispering due to his astonishing 'pronouncement'.

However, the DD delivered frankly his opinion of the DAA's administrative attitudes and relations with school members:

*To be honest, I did not wish that the DAA would be the successor to the principalship. There was a secret here which I did not care to tell you since I was determined to retire from this school. Many experienced school members knew that the DAA had kept an observation list in which he recorded and evaluated school members' 'bad records', including the present principal. I mean he was like a 'secret cop' who recorded everyone's conduct. How could he do this? In addition, although he was a*

*hardworking colleague, I could say that most teachers did not wish he were the following principal because of his demanding style. By then we had a 'bitter' life.*

He went on to express his lengthy comments:

*At present, with the implementation of the principal selection, I was afraid that the present principal could not find any vacancy at another school. Sure enough, after contacting several principals within the city, he had no option but to change his mind and strive for his extension of tenure in this school. In order to gain support from core members of the parental association, including the present president, the former president and local important political figures, the principal organized restaurant parties to earn their endorsement. ... If fact, originally several core members of the parental association tended to hope the DAA, not the principal, became the succeeding principal mainly due to long-term contact and relations. Most importantly, his hardworking and industrious attitudes obtained many parents' praise. ... But in my point of view, based on campus ethics, we had to protect the present principal's tenure and position. More specifically, if he failed to get another opportunity to become another school's principal, the present principal probably would be the first person to be demoted as a teacher and eventually this might become a hot news!*

Apart from his private visits and parties with central figures of the parental association, the present principal consulted with core members of the teachers' association behind closed doors in order to gain their support. According to the former president of Hillside teacher's association:

*Almost everyone knew that the DAA definitely was a capable leader, yet, with the forthcoming curriculum policy, we preferred that the school moved forward slightly and gradually rather than experiencing poignant change. This might be close to the Hillside's school culture. ... In other words, we hoped that the present principal could extend his term at Hillside although, to speak frankly, I still wondered what his leadership would be like...*

Owing to more than seventy per cent support from teaching staff, surveyed by the teachers' association, the representatives of the parental association had no alternative but to accept this outcome. Regarding the appointment and selection of principalship at the investigated school, it could be really like a 'battle over position' not merely between the present principal and the DAA, but also among the internal school members and external community leading figures involved.

### ***Guanxi as the core from external support***

The practice of principal selection could not be

understood by considering it simply as a technical activity but a fully *political* process. In order to gain external support, particularly in Chinese society to build *guanxi* (that is, social relations and networks) (Lo and Otis, 2003; Wong and Chan, 1999), the present principal needed to develop micropolitical interactions with local community personages who normally were or used to be central members of the school parental association. Concretely, according to the former DD, the principal invited some vital community figures to restaurant parties by which the principal wished to build closer relationships with them. It can be argued that *guanxi* is a vice under the current political and socio-economic systems in Chinese societies (Fan, 2002). For example, a school would like to recruit new teachers and you are one of the examinees, and it is whispered that you could be easier to be recruited safely if you have a relation with the principal, such as the principal's relative or looking for some political figures to impose pressure on the principal. Another case is on the air which is unveiled of the stealthy delivery of 'red envelope' (that is, similar to bribery) to the principal in order to 'build up' some relation. It was reported that 'the market of bribery' could be up to half a million of NT dollar.

### ***Confucian campus ethics: Hierarchical relations***

In addition, this hidden politics of principal selection could correspond to the Confucian perspective of hierarchical relationship. As the present DAA commented:

*The present principal possessed his principalship for the first time. Based on campus ethics or traditional Confucianism, I suggested that the former DAA should be patient and give up competing for the school leadership with the present principal. Furthermore, his age was younger than the principal's so that it was taken for granted to let the present principal have this opportunity to strive for another term. This also corresponds to how we should respect the elders and superiors in order to maintain school operation harmonically and smoothly.*

The so-called 'campus ethics' here could be tracked to the traditional Confucian thought which values the hierarchy of social positions and of age difference. In this case, it was centred on the precedence of career promotion between seniors and juniors. Since the DAA's age and his social status were younger and lower than the principal, it was that in Chinese societies we normally yield precedence to the senior's standpoint. To put it briefly, the juniors should respect the senior's decision on the whole (Jandt, 1995). Also, the former DAA delivered a similar account about how he gave up Hillside's principal selection when I interviewed him. In practice, juniors or subordinates should pay huge respect to seniors or superiors (Cheng, 1991). Confucianism was

grounded in a philosophy and practice of social inequality which measures human morality in relation to each person's position in the familial and social hierarchy (Weatherley, 2002). Confucian thoughts place stress on social harmony which seems to justify the apparent need for a hierarchical and therefore unequal society.

After gaining the chance of preserving his principalship at Hillside, the present principal expressed his gratitude to all the school members and parents, on one hand; on the other hand, he worried about the forthcoming school appraisal, especially since it could be regarded as a principals' appraisal during the period of his leadership at one school. Nevertheless, the former DAA, currently working as an acting principal at another school, thought that it was the production of political democratization which tended to be responsive to the demands and judgements of parents and the general public.

It was unavoidable to face parental pressures and demands particularly since parents were legally empowered to select the prospective principal. Additionally, the government would like to implement the policy of school appraisal. We could imagine that schools would encounter more and more external queries and requests. Schools had become market products which could be evaluated by consumers, that is, parents and the general public.

Principals, as the core leading figures for schooling, seem to be thrust into market culture and expected to deliver to 'clients' a new management of the school' (Healy, 1994: 39). In order to cope with the coming implementation of school appraisal policy, principals need to demonstrate quality and improvement on quality; otherwise they may be in danger of 'disappearing' (Fidler, 1989), which refers to be 'possibly demoted as school teachers', according to the principal. If the school administration stands for nothing, the school will inevitably be overtaken by those with sufficient power to do stand for something (Holmes and Wynn, 1989). The principal indicated that he would face the school appraisal around four years later, which could be a significant ground for application for principal selection next time.

## Conclusion

Above all, the implementation of principal selection is not merely viewed as a technical activity but also as a political process, which is embedded in macro-societal political democratization and traditional Confucian value in Taiwan. More specifically, if a principal tends to extend his tenure at the same school he has to achieve local parental buttress which is regarded as a critical hinge. This may fit within what Brown (1990) calls the 'ideology of parentocracy'. Since the top-down imperative introduces community members and parents into the process

of principal selection, and in particular, they act as the critical crux of selection procedure, this would have an impact on principals' professional prospects regarding their appointments, career advancements and other career aspirations.

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