Behind the battles between streaming and mixed-ability grouping: the market mechanism in Taiwan

Ling-Ying Lu*

*PhD student in the Department of Education and Society (DES), Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. St John's Land, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ
Email: s0571500@sms.ed.ac.uk


Abstract:

This paper attempts to explore the market mechanism revealed in the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy in Taiwan and to trace the influence of the wider educational contexts. Utilising documentary analysis, questionnaire survey, and semi-structured interview of school educators, this study finds the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy is shadowed by the embedded market mechanism in junior high level education. School educators perceive that parents value the high entry rate to the ‘best’ high schools the most. As reaction, junior high schools develop strategies such as selecting the higher attaining pupils to form special class to boost pupils’ academic performance and also to attract future pupils. Although there is no major policy introducing the market mechanism in Taiwan, the wider educational contexts, including the joint senior high school entry examination, the control over the provision of senior high level education and the centralised curriculum together shape the ‘market’ in Taiwanese junior high level education.

Introduction

The mixed-ability grouping policy in Taiwan has been a controversial policy for nearly thirty years. Initiated in 1982 as an administrative regulation and turned into legislation in 2004, the mixed-ability grouping policy in Taiwan aims to alleviate the divide between pupils in primary and junior high schools1 within which pupils are streamed into different levels of class based solely on their academic performance and school prioritises its resource to higher academic achieving pupils (Chang, C.H. & Kuo, 1984). The latest version of the policy prohibits the adoption of streaming2 in primary and junior high level education, and allows setting3 in maths, English and science in the second and the third year of junior high level education (Act of Compulsory Education, 2004).

Nevertheless, just as the controversy generated in different countries, the possible positive and negative effects of adopting mixed-ability grouping are constantly being argued by policy actors to support or oppose the policy. Further, the disputes over both the rationales and the practices of
mixed-ability grouping policy resulted in several revisions of policy texts, and changes over governing instruments (Chuang, 2006).

In a survey regarding the attitudes of school educators toward the mixed-ability grouping policy, most school educators expressed positive attitudes toward the policy but argued that the interference of parents on policy practice is one of the important barriers of policy implementation (Lo, 2000). A similar argument is constantly mentioned by school educators on different occasions such as the ‘county-wide junior high school principal conference’ or the policy promotion meetings held by the Ministry of Education (United News, 1985, July 16; Hung, 1988, July 05; Hu, 1997, Aug 19; Chein, 2000, May 19; Lee, 2003 Oct 31; Chen, 2004 June 11; United News, 2005, April 13; National Teachers’ Association, 2009). According to school educators, influential parents often request that schools stream pupils or group higher academic achieving ones and threaten to transfer their children to other schools(private and also public schools) that provide these ‘special classes’. It is also argued by local educators that while other schools use streaming or establish special classes to attract pupils, there is no reason not to adopt the same strategy. The ‘demand and supply’ and the ‘competition’ logic which resemble the logic of a ‘market’ penetrates the discussion over the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy.

However, unlike many countries that officially introduce the market mechanism which combines various market-oriented policies into the education system (Ball, 2003; Croxford & Raffe, 2007; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Gewirtz, 1996; Whitty & Power, 2002; Van Zanten, 1996), there has been no major policy introduced in Taiwan regarding utilising the market mechanism to contribute to the quality of junior high level education.

As suggested by scholars, countries in different regions of the world began to introduce educational policies that explicitly or implicitly promote market principles in the education system after the 1980s (Whitty & Power, 2002a; Whitty & Power, 2002b). The logic of the market mechanism—utilising the interests of consumers and the competition to boost the quality of supply—is considered to be reasonable and efficient to enhance the quality and also the diversity of the public services under the ideology of new-liberalism (Gerwitz, et al., 1995). Scholars suggest that in England, it is not only the education system that has experienced the market-oriented shift, other social policies regarding health care and social services have also experienced a similar reform (Gerwitz, et al., 1995; Le Grand, 1991). Further, scholars also indicate that the market system established in the public service is different from the ‘real market’. Within the ‘quasi-market’ established by the governments, the chosen service provided is free at the point of delivery, and the role of the government has changed into primarily the funder of services rather than the provider. Within the ‘quasi-market’, the government purchases services from both the private and the public providers through various mechanisms, for example, by enrolment-link funding mediated by parental choice. (Le Grand, 1991; Le Grand and Bartlett 1993, in Woods, et al, 1998; Le Grand and Bartlett 1993, in Croxford and Raffe, 2007).

In practice, the application of market principles in the education system involves a constellation of policies that intend to form different parts of the ‘market’. The common features of the education market include parental choice, open-enrolment, enrolment-linked funding, devolved management and
authority and the publication of information regarding school performance (Croxford & Raffe, 2007; Gerwitz, 1995). Additionally, it is found that different countries employ different policies to form various kinds of market regime, and the contexts of the education market also have impacts on the strength of the market regime which may exert various degrees of influence on education inequity (Croxford & Raffe, 2007; Gerwitz, 1995; Whitty & Power, 2002b).

In the Taiwanese education system, parental choice of junior high schools is limited. Only approximately 10% of the pupils go to private schools by parental choice and most primary school graduates are assigned to public junior high schools based on their household registration. The system used to be straightforward that each catchment area only had one junior high school for several feeder primary schools; it was after 2001 that the system was gradually revised so that in some local counties parents can choose from two or three schools within one catchment area. In addition, there is no major policy regarding the official evaluation of school performance or accountability-based financial support that raises the stake of schooling in junior high level education. However, as indicated by school educators, the competition among public schools and also between public and private schools seems to be fierce which further influences the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy.

In the analysis of Croxford and Raffe (2007), the strength of the market regime, which may influence the degree of class inequality that resulted from the established education market, could be traced from three sources: the market model, market conditions and educational cultures. In Taiwan’s case, the market model, which is the main feature of the quasi-market education system, is relatively weak compared to other countries, but it is worth exploring whether the market conditions, the educational cultures, or other factors together establish a ‘hidden market’ within the education system in Taiwan.

Drawing on a larger study that aims to explore the mixed-ability grouping policy in Taiwan by considering not only the policy process but also the wider political, economic, societal and educational contexts, this paper has the chance to consider the influence of wider educational contexts on the formation and operation of the education market in junior high level education in Taiwan.

As we will see in later sections, the market force in Taiwan is not created through the policy regarding parental choice or quality control; the senior high school entry system along with the planned and stratified provision of senior high level education seem to together create the market mechanism within junior high level education. Although this study recognises the Power’s account that the education market ‘stems from the long-standing relationship between education and a stratified social structure’ (Power, 1994, p571), it also argues that the design of the education system and the ideology and values embedded within the system shape the concrete ‘manifestation’ of the market (Croxford & Raffe, 2007). The rest of this paper will demonstrate this ‘market-like’ phenomenon in Taiwanese junior high education within the context of the mixed-ability grouping policy. By tracing the wider educational contexts that contribute to this ‘hidden market system’, this study aims to identify the ideologies embedded in this hidden market place that may infringe the equity of education.
Research design

This paper is part of a larger study that adopts various research strategies including documentary analysis, questionnaire survey and instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to explore the process of the mixed-ability grouping policy in Taiwan. The data used in this paper was also obtained through the above three strategies between mid 2007 and mid 2008.

Documentary analysis was adopted to explore the conflicts, including the market-like relationships and the possible structural influences that have impacts on the conflicts within the long-term process of the mixed-ability grouping policy. Policy texts including regulations, official announcements, and implementation procedures, documents retained by influential interest groups, relevant media reports, and prior research were collected as analysis materials. Further, to trace the possible influence of the wider educational contexts on the market-like relationship, documents regarding the senior high school entry system and the characteristic of the Taiwanese education system were also collected.

Questionnaire survey and instrumental case study were utilised to obtain response from school educators regarding their perceptions of and attitudes toward the conflicts within the mixed-ability grouping policy. Two local counties within the local educational authority, the educators and the parents have publicly resisted the policy were selected for the research. The questionnaires were distributed to all junior high school principals in the two counties. Among 90 principals, 54 responded the survey which makes a 60% responding rate. After the completion of the questionnaire survey, instrumental case study were conducted in two junior high schools (one in each county)—Pinewood Junior High and North Creek Junior High. In addition to the collection of school level policy texts and relevant meeting records, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals, the director of teaching affairs, and five teachers who teach five main subjects. Pinewood Junior High is located in a catchment area where parents can choose from two schools and North Creek is the only junior high school in the given catchment area. Questions concerning educators’ perceptions of parent’s attitudes, parents’ actions, and the reactions of schools to the requests made by parents were explored.

The analysis of the collected data combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The data collected through the questionnaire survey was analysed using SPSS to see how principals perceive parents’ attitudes and actions. The data drawn from documents and the instrumental case study were analysed following a procedure that contains three components: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions to understand the phenomenon and the arguments (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Through critical reading, patterns of parents’ demands, schools’ reactions, and educators’ perceptions of the relationship were coded and analysed. Furthermore, through examining the influence of the wider educational contexts on teaching, learning, and parents’ expectations on junior high schools, the foundation of the market-like relationship between parents and junior high schools that embeds in the Taiwanese education system emerged.
Findings:

The findings are divided into five sections as follows to present and discuss the ‘market-like’ phenomenon in Taiwan. In the first section, the ‘demand’ side of the education market—parents’ demand and the possible influence are presented. Secondly, the strategies schools adopt to meet the demands of parents will be illustrated. After the presentation of the operation of the market, the third section introduces the prior researches that aimed to explain the phenomenon and points out that the concept of ‘market’ provides an alternative perspective to examine the phenomenon in-depth. In the fourth section, issues regarding the effects of the hidden education markets are discussed, and in the last section I argue that the wider educational contexts have influenced the formation and operation of the junior high school market in Taiwan.

1. Parents’ demands and influence

This section demonstrates school educators’ perceptions of parents’ demands and the influence of parents on school practices of the mixed-ability grouping policy. The results of the questionnaire survey provided the general views held by principals. Principals in the two research counties were asked if parents had questioned the adoption of the mixed-ability grouping policy and parents had recommended other grouping practices. The results showed that all responding principals indicated that parents were questioning the adoption of the mixed-ability grouping policy. The demands proposed the most by parents include adopting streaming, establishing the gifted and the talented classes, and establishing special classes for higher attaining pupils. The most frequently mentioned rationales behind these demands are ‘schools should teach in accordance to pupils’ abilities’ and ‘schools should not sacrifice the “learning right” of higher attaining pupils’. Further, 64.1% of the responding principals indicated that they often or sometimes got the message that parents would transfer their children to other schools if the schools couldn’t provide the ‘special’ classes.

In the two researched schools, a large majority of the interviewed educators argued that what parents value the most is the ‘high entry rate to the highest ranking senior high schools’, and using streaming or grouping the better academic achievers are perceived by parents and sometimes teachers to be the most effective strategies to boost pupils’ academic performance. The principal of Pinewood Junior High stated:

When I came to this school, many parents asked that why we hadn’t established a gifted class just as other schools had done. Parents and some of the teachers were concerned with the senior high school entry rate of the school and argued that the school should use streaming.

A description provided by the director of teaching affairs at Pinewood clearly depicts how parents and schools value the academic performance in schools. She described:

In the beginning of every school year, we demonstrate the progress of the senior high school
entry rates to parents using a pie chart or bar chart in the School-Parents Meeting. Though we have made steady progress in the numbers of pupils entering public schools\(^7\), what parents care about the most is the number of children we send to the highest ranking senior high schools. I often find it interesting because not every child can enter the highest ranking high schools, but every parent asks about the ‘highest ranking high school entry rate’ and also about the strategies the school has adopted to raise the figure.

In North Creek Junior High, school educators also pointed out the importance of senior high school entry rate and its connection to the adoption of streaming. The principal stated:

For parents, the most objective criterion for comparing junior high schools is the number of pupils the school sends to the highest ranking high schools.[……] And parents are worried that if we use mixed-ability grouping the pupils’ academic performance might decrease.

These parents’ worries and demands were said to result in bothersome consequences; among them the most frequently mentioned are the loss of pupil intake and the competition, in a negative sense, among schools.

Pinewood has undergone a gradual loss of pupil intake in the last few years, and North Creek used to lose its pupil intake to neighbouring schools. Though pupil intake in North Creek has increased in the last few years, school educators are highly aware of the ‘pupil loss crisis’ and have developed several strategies to retain and to recruit pupils.

As mentioned above, there is no major policy initiated regarding parental choice of junior high school in Taiwan and the choice is limited to private schools and the options of two or three schools within the same catchment areas. Nonetheless, changing children’s household register (postal address) in order to enroll children in the ideal primary and junior high schools is common practice in Taiwan. The phenomenon was pointed out by scholars(Chang, D. R. 1998; Chiang; 2004, Chou, 2001; Huang, T.Y., 2008), and scholars argues that the low-cost of changing household registration(postal address)--compared to buying a house in the popular catchment area, which is another strategy adopted by parents—facilitates the self-initiated parental choice of schools(Huang, T.Y, 2008). It is also found that there is a correlation between the mother’s level of education and the possibility of changing the household registration(postal address) for their children (Huang, T.Y, 2008) and most parents, especially the ones with higher educational and social economic status support the concept of parental choice (Li, 2007).

According to the interviewed educators in the two studied schools, the self-initiated parental choice, which results in the loss of pupil intake, has brought about at least two major problems. The first is the possible redundancy of personnel in schools. At Pinewood Junior High, teachers have been transferred to other schools in last few years. Though most teachers are guaranteed to regain teaching positions in other schools, the worry over being transferred to an unfamiliar school pervades Pinewood. The principal at Pinewood stated:

If we keep losing pupils and cut the class numbers, teachers will be transferred out, which
goes against their wishes.[……] Teachers are very worried that they may be transferred out and try very hard to increase the senior high school entry rates with the intention of attracting more children to attend our school.

The second problem mentioned is the ‘decreasing quality of pupils’, which is viewed as a problem correled to inferior school reputation and also, a possible pupil intake loss and personnel cuts. There is an understanding among educators that the pupils who are transferred are usually the higher attaining ones. Under the circumstances, the schools that face a decrease in pupil intake may be left with pupils who have an inferior performance, which may further lower the schools’ senior high school entry rates and undermine schools’ reputation and the opportunity to attract better academic achieving pupils. The deputy director of teaching affairs at Pinewood stated:

We need these academically able pupils to keep up the reputation of the school. It will look bad if we don’t have enough pupils with high scores in the senior high school entry examination.

Educators in North Creek used the metaphor ‘vicious cycle’ to describe the consequence of losing academically able pupils and pointed out that every school develops various strategies, sometimes the anti-educational ones to avoid the predicament.

In brief, the findings show that within the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy, most schools experience requests from parents to use streaming or to establish special classes because these practices are viewed as crucial to increase pupils’ attainments. Further, school educators are highly aware of the ‘self-initiated parental choice’ and the subsequent consequences.

What should be noted is that although the interviewed educators constantly used a general term—‘parents’ demands’ to describe the pressure burdened the schools, parents who truly request the use of streaming or transfer their children to a different school are actually small in number. When asked to specify the type and numbers of parents who strongly demanded that the school should take care of the academically able pupils, the deputy director of teaching affairs at Pinewood stated:

To be fair, there are not many parents that make strong demands. Only the few whose children have really good grades strongly emphasise that the school should use every measure to boost pupils’ academic performance.

However, as described above, schools ‘need’ these pupils to keep the high entry rate to the highest ranking high schools, which may create a ‘virtuous circle’ (the opposite of a vicious circle) that more academically able pupils will be attracted to the school and the performance of the school will be kept satisfied.

Further, influential figures in the school parents association, such as the heads of the school parents association who are often the parents of higher attaining pupils, are also the ones mentioned as putting pressure on school practices. It is stated that the head of school parents association may enquire about the possibility for the school to establish special classes for academically able pupils in order to
compete with other schools. For school educators, this voice represents both the interests of the parents and the schools. Though it is only the minority of parents that are actually making demands regarding selecting higher attaining pupils or making threats to leave, the consequences of these demands, including the creation of a ‘vicious circle’ and the possible personnel cuts reinforce the strength of the ‘demand’ and contribute to correspondent actions. In an analytical sense, educators’ understanding of the phenomena, including parents’ preference and the possible influence, resemble the ‘market logic’ that parents are the ‘customers’ of junior high schools who use the senior high school entry rate as the crucial criterion to evaluate the quality of schools. It can be found in later sections that in responding to this perception, schools also act like the ‘producers’ and the ‘sellers’ in a market place that develop according strategies to attract potential and also valuable customers.

2. School strategies:

To respond to the perceived parents’ requests, schools have developed various strategies to secure the products that are valued by parents, and the establishment of special classes for higher attaining pupils is probably the most decisive practice. As suggested by educators, under the mixed-ability grouping legislation which utilises sanctions to ensure the implementation, schools are left with a lot less room to fulfil parents’ needs of streaming, but many other strategies are still developed under the loopholes of the mixed-ability grouping legislation.

In the results of the questionnaire survey, though no schools responded that they use streaming or establish special classes to recruit academically able pupils, 43% of responding principals stated that they knew of some schools that still adopted streaming, and 61% of responding principals indicated that many schools establish ‘gifted classes’ or ‘talented classes’ for the purpose of grouping higher attaining pupils to boost their examination scores.

In the two research school, establishing special classes is the main strategy adopted. At Pinewood Junior High, the principal argued that with parents’ demands and the influence of the practices of other schools, they were forced to establish two special classes to group higher attaining pupils. The special classes are called ‘weekend advanced classes’ and around 70 pupils in 9th grade are selected into the two classes based on their average test scores is all academic subjects. The special class is provided on Saturdays and Sundays, for four hours each day. The school usually selects the most experienced teachers to teach these extra lessons and the main objective of these classes is to boost pupils testing scores in the senior high school entry examination. The principal stated:

Actually, not only parents value the high senior high school entry rate, so do many teachers. Many of them asked about using streaming instead of mixed-ability grouping since other schools have already done that. But I usually respond that we should find other ways to approach our objectives without violating educational regulations. Thus the establishment of the weekend advanced classes is a small step we took to fulfil parents’ as well as teachers’ needs.
Furthermore, at the time of being researched, Pinewood was planning to establish a gifted class at the end of 2008. It was argued that having a gifted class in the school would attract students with better academic performance and prevent the school from losing pupil intake.

A similar special class has also been established in North Creek. There are also two special classes established at the weekend. Pupils can sign up to the class voluntarily but the school selects participants by pupils’ academic performance. It is the same as at Pinewood, the school arranges the most experienced teachers to teach the higher attaining pupils in these two classes. According to most of the interviewed educators, the establishment of the weekend special class is not only resulted from the strong demand made by influential parents, but also the competition among schools. The director of teaching affairs pointed out that although the school often claims that these classes are established to help pupils, the fact is that the school needs to compete with other schools by using this special class to attract higher attaining pupils.

In addition, as many parents want to send their children to the weekend special class, ‘academic performance’ becomes the sole criteria for selecting pupils into these special classes. It is argued by the interviewed educators in both the schools that the academic performance of pupils is the most ‘impartial and unquestionable criterion’ that could be accepted. The deputy director of teaching affairs at Pinewood stated:

> We try to use a method that is impartial and publicly recognised to select the pupils of the weekend special classes. Letting pupils and their parents know their academic performance ranking is important because pupils understand that if they don’t have a competitive performance they may be critically judged in the special classes even if they are selected.

The director of teaching affairs in North Creek also indicated that due to the limited resources, they could only choose the higher attaining pupils for the special classes. It is also found that schools are concerned with the pupil composition of these special classes. At Pinewood, pupils who have discipline problems may be excluded from being selected for the special classes due to their possible obstruction on the overall ‘competitive atmosphere’. Also at Pinewood, there were some teachers suggesting that the school should only have one special class instead of two in order to provide the most academically able pupils the most competitive environment. It can be seen that in these special classes, the pupils who have a higher academic performance are the ones to be taken extra care of. Pupils with lower attainments are excluded from extra attention through the selection process, and the labels of ‘those who have the potential to enter higher ranking high schools’ and ‘those who have not’ are subsequently created.

There are also two other strategies commonly adopted by schools raise the overall performance of the school in order to attract ‘customers’. The first, it is aware that recruiting the academically able pupils is the best way to raise the senior high school entry rate of the school, which may further increase the intake of academically able pupils. North Creek once offered a scholarship for pupils with high average scores at primary schools, and the principal regularly visit the parents whose children have a higher attainment at the feeder primary schools to persuade them to enrol their children in North Creek.
In this case, pupils who have a higher academic performance are the ‘valuable’ customers (Gewirtz, et al., 1995).

The second strategy, in order to raise the overall attainment of pupils, the teaching in the two researched schools aims primarily at preparing pupils for the senior high school entry examination. At North Creek, all pupils stay until the eighth period, which is an extra period other than normal school hours to have lessons or study. On the weekend, all 9th grade pupils go to school, where teachers help them with their academic work. The School also designs special enhanced classes for higher attaining pupils in the summer before they start 9th grades. At Pinewood, teachers argued that under the pressure of the senior high school entry examination, innovative teaching are unlikely to be implemented and the majority of school hours are spent on dictating, reviewing, testing, and correction.

In sum, the findings show that a sense of competition is among the surveyed and the interviewed schools. Schools are aware of the strategies adopted by other schools that they ‘learn’ from each other to apply similar ‘academic performance boosting’ strategies. In order to produce the ‘product’ that meets the needs of parents, schools on the one hand establish ‘special classes’ as requested and on the other hand adopt various strategies, including recruiting pupils with higher attainments, extending school hours, and focusing on examination preparation to raise senior high school entry rates.

3. Issues within the market place:

Through the exploration of the demands of the parents, the strategies adopted by the schools and the rationales school educators hold, several effects, including the established common practices, the modes of interaction, and the hidden ideologies are revealed.

As demonstrated above, the relationship between parents and schools resembles the relationship between sellers and customers in a market place that the practice of schools is ‘constrained’ by the needs of parents. It is also found that within the educational market, not only schools are evaluated by parents, pupils are also evaluated by schools. The director of teaching affairs at North Creek Junior High provides a clear explanation:

Other than having good teachers, the most important condition for schools to obtain a high senior high school entry rate is having ‘good’ pupils.

In the above sections, it has been illustrated that many strategies are developed in order to attract the academically able pupils. The intention and the action to recruit pupils with higher attainments to avoid the ‘vicious circle’ implicitly discriminates pupils with lower attainments and further implicates the narrowed function of junior high level schooling.

This competition for pupil intake among schools is crucial in influencing schools’ decisions and actions. It is found that within the among school competition, the ‘supply’ in the market place seems to be uniformed that schools ‘learn’ from each other to provide similar services to attract ‘customers’. The account of the director of teaching affairs at Pinewood portrays the phenomenon well. She stated:

We can only follow the common trend in order to survive. We usually try to understand what
other schools are doing now to see if we can do the same thing.

Scholars have suggested rather than contributing to the diversity of education provision, the market logic seems to encourage ‘a uniformity of values’ (Croxford and Raffe, 2007, p40). Further more, it seems that with the mindset of ‘following the trend’, the consideration over the strategies adopted for competition is neglected in Taiwan. For example, there is rarely doubt over the necessity to prepare those who already perform well to perform better, and alternative thoughts, such as establishing special classes and arranging the best teachers for the lower attaining pupils, seize much less attention.

4. Prior explanations of the senior high school entry competition

From the above findings, it can be found that the behaviours and the perceptions held by educators indicate the existence of a ‘junior high school market’ in Taiwan. However, as suggested earlier, there is no major educational policy that explicitly introduces the market mechanism into junior high level education in Taiwan. In the discussion about the phenomena in Taiwan, the concept of ‘market’ is rarely applied to understand the concrete interactions between parents and schools; but the term ‘senior high school entry competition’ has long been discussed by scholars and also policy makers from different perspectives. While the ‘senior high school entry competition’ is criticised as contributing to the ‘abnormal junior high level education’ which utilising streaming, corporal punishment and teaching to test to boost pupils’ examination scores, scholars propose various explanations of the phenomenon and suggest different solutions.

The first, it is argued that the ‘senior high school entry competition’ is resulted from ‘Sheng-Hsueh-Chu-Yi’ (升學主義), which refers to the parents’ ‘fanaticism’ over entering the advanced school (Chang, Y.W. & Ling, 2002; Yang & Yeh, 1984). This argument focuses on explaining people’s action and argues that while people ‘irrationally’ pursue higher test scores regardless of personal aptitudes and the price need to be paid, then they possess the ‘fanaticism over entering the advanced school’ (Chang, Y.W. & Ling, 2002). This account is also constantly mentioned by the interviewed educators in this study to argue that parents’ obsession over schools’ senior high school entry rate and children’s academic performance should be responsible for aggravating the ‘abnormal education’ in junior high schools.

Secondly, there are other scholars suggesting that the competition results from the lack of opportunity to enter the ideal advanced schools (Wang, C.W. & Ling, 1994; Ling & Wang, C.W.,1996; Lin & Wu, 1994). Instead of blaming the ‘irrational’ motives of parents, the inappropriate and unequal senior high school tracking design is argued as the important source that results in parents’ ‘fanaticism over entering the advanced school’ and the fierce ‘senior school entry competition’. This argument influenced the reform initiated in the 1990s in Taiwan and the provision of senior high level education has been gradually revised (Huang, H. M., 2004). Before the reform, the provision of senior high level education was strictly controlled by the Ministry of Education. In the name of developing human capital through education and the ideology of matching education structure with economic structure, senior
high level education was arbitrarily divided into two categories—academic and vocational schools; and the ratio between the two kinds of school was also predetermined, that the valued academic high schools only recruit 30% of senior high level pupils during 1982 to 1995 (Hsieh, et al., 1996, Cheng, 2002). Although the provision of senior high level education has changed since the 1990s that more senior high schools, including academic, vocation, and also integrated senior high schools have been established, the divide between academic and vocational and between public and private schools, still encourages the’ better senior high school entry competition’ (Ma, 2001). From the findings of this study, it is found that the ‘best senior high school entry competition’ is influential in the practice of grouping the best academic attaining pupils in junior high schools.

The third perspective is an explanation extracted from Dore’s discussion of ‘diploma disease’ that argues that in a late developed country, the acquisition of a satisfactory diploma is the ticket to enter the modernised bureaucracy (Dore, 1976, 1997). In Taiwan’s case, the state, which on the one hand controls the ‘supply’ of diplomas, and on the other hand utilises diplomas, usually the college graduate qualification as the selection criterion to recruit governmental employees who enjoy specific welfare and high social status, aggravates credentialism and the ‘senior high school entry competition’ (Yang & Yeh, 1984; Cheng, 2002). Further, while the function of ‘qualification earning’ of education already has the power to turn education into ritualised actions (Dore, 1976, 1997), the measures used in Taiwan to endorse qualifications, which include joint examination and joint pupil allocation shape the teaching and learning in schools. Scholars investigated the original rationales embedded in the modern educational system in Taiwan9, and found that the policy makers treated ‘examination’ as an important tool to discipline pupils regarding both personal behaviour and the attitudes toward knowledge (Cheng, 2002). Nonetheless, many subsequent scholars argue that emphasising on examination in fact narrows the scope of education and contributes to ‘anti-educational’ conduct in schools (Cheng, 2002; Yang & Yen, 1984); and junior high schools also possess the ‘fanaticism over entering the advanced school’ and thus becomes an ‘advanced school entry industry’ where the school puts all its efforts into teaching the tested subjects, cramming pupils with large amounts of tests, and streaming pupils in order to pushing the academically able ones(Wang, C.W. & Ling, 1994).

In this study, both the surveyed principals and interviewed educators were aware of the influence of the senior high school entry system and the provision of senior high level education. The survey results show that principals perceive the senior high school entry system to be the most influential barrier to the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy, and the abolition of the senior high school entry joint examination would better facilitate policy practice. School educators also argued that the quality disparity and the explicit ranking among senior high schools trigger people’s motivation to obtain the better valued credentials.

However, though the above three perspectives provide insight into the phenomenon, the subjects of discussion are partial that either focus on discussing the contexts, or focus mainly on agency. The relationship between the contexts and the agency is abstractly portrayed without the exploration of the concrete and often conflicted mechanism within the relationship. The relationships between schools and parents and among schools are also rarely discussed. The concept of ‘market’, which emphasises
motivations and the actions of the policy actors in different positions, thus helps establish the connections between schools and parents within the practice of the mixed-ability grouping policy, and helps trace the relationship between the macro and the micro through concrete examples.

5. The influence of the wider educational contexts on the hidden market

In this study, it is further found that the wider educational contexts may contribute to specific ideologies among parents and teachers; and the interaction between parents and teachers in the marker-like relationship further reinforces the ideologies.

For example, in understanding the ways in which educators perceive and discuss pupils’ abilities and teaching in different kinds of grouping practices, this study finds that the perceptions of the interviewed educators are profoundly influenced by the dichotomous provision of senior high level education and the senior high school entry examination. While talking about pupils’ ability, a clear divide between ‘academic aptitude’ and ‘vocational aptitude’ which resembles the dichotomy of the provision of senior high level education is revealed in educators’ accounts. Whilst the divide is established based mainly on pupils’ academic performance, this account is sometimes used by educators to discuss the requests of parents and argues that not all pupils have the ability and the aptitude to be placed in special classes. Further, it is also found that the way educators talk about teaching in mixed-ability groups is shaped by the senior high school entry examination and the centralised curriculum and that the necessity of covering and reviewing all textbook materials and helping pupils be ready for the examination was constantly mentioned. Under this premise, teaching in mixed-ability groups is difficult and may fail the academically able pupils. The principal at Pinewood described how the wider contexts penetrate the attitudes and practices of teachers and also parents:

I tried to encourage teachers to develop different teaching methods and reduce the amount of teaching materials, but I found many parents still wanted to see the school provides more classes to raise pupils’ performances, and many teachers, with the intention of fulfilling parents’ needs and raising pupils’ test scores, still teach using old fashioned methods by cramming children with lots of materials and tests.

In other words, the imagination towards pupils’ ability and teaching in junior high level education is limited by wider educational contexts and reinforced by parents and teachers. Under the circumstances, the imagination of the ‘products’ and the strategies adopted for producing satisfactory products is also limited that the establishment of special classes is popular under the commonly accepted ideology that the academically able pupils are the ones deserved to be taken extra care of.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the results of this study show that school educators consider the senior high school entry rate to be the most important ‘product’ that parents value. Parents, by changing children’s household
registration (postal address) to manipulate the catchment areas, choose schools by their senior high school entry rate. The pressure of losing pupil intake and further losing teaching positions reinforces schools’ willingness to adopt the test score boosting strategies that some parents desire.

The practice of the mixed-ability grouping is thus twisted in the market place in that schools establish special classes and arrange experienced teachers for academically able pupils. In the researched schools, higher attaining pupils were selected to participate in special after school, weekend, and winter/summer vacation classes for the purposes of boosting the senior high school entry rate of the school and attracting more pupils with a higher attainment. In addition, the concept of dividing pupils into ‘those who have academic aptitude’ and ‘those who have vocational aptitude’ justifies the selection of the ‘deserving pupils’.

The influence of wider educational context, including the influence of the senior high school entry examination, the provision of senior high level education and the centralised curriculum on junior high level education is identified. It is found that not only is the market place established under the wider educational context, parents’ and teachers’ imagination towards the demands and supply of the market place is also constrained by the wider educational context within which the understanding of pupils’ ability, the imagination towards teaching, and the criteria used to select pupils for special classes were mostly unidirectional.

Notes:

1 The Taiwanese education system is consists of four levels of education: primary (age 7-12), junior high (age 13-15), senior high (15-18), and college (after 18). The primary and the junior high level education are compulsory.

2 To divide students into groups based on their general academic achievements. Students who have similar academic achievements will be taught in the same group for all subjects.

3 For most of the subjects, students are taught in heterogeneous groups, but in certain subjects they are divided into groups based on their attainments.

4 The targets of survey were educators in primary and junior high level school in Taipei City. By random sampling, 810 targets including school teachers and administrators were selected and 575 responses were obtained for analysis (Lo, 2000).

5 Both are pseudonyms.

6 The five main subjects are math, Mandarin, English, science and social studies. There are also the five subjects tested in senior high school entry examination.

7 The public senior high schools are perceived as having higher quality and higher status than most private senior high schools in Taiwan.

8 In 1982, only 70.54% of junior high school graduates had the opportunity to enter senior high schools. In 1995, the figure raised to 89.17%, and in 2008 the figure reached 95.38% (Ministry of Education, 2008).

9 The education system adopted after 1945 in Taiwan was developed by the Nationalist Government in
China in the beginning of 20th century.

Reference:


Chein, H. C. (2000, May 19). The request of streaming: some parents demand streaming according to pupils' attainments. United News,


United News. (1985, July 16). Schools can use both mixed-ability grouping and streaming in the third year of junior high level education. United News,

United News. (2005, April 13). Gifted class=Music talent class=PE talent class=higher attainments class. United News,


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 10 May 2010