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Educational decentralization policies in Thailand and South Korea: A comparative study

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Article Info

Abstract

The Thai government, as a result of globalization and intent of the 1997 constitution, initiated an educational decentralization policy which has been in place for over two decades, but serious problems and challenges remain and still need to be resolved as they have led to opposition and misunderstanding, hindering the policy's progress. This paper aims to examine the educational decentralization policy of Thailand and compare it with that of South Korea, whose has been in place longer, and which is ranked at the top of the international education system. The methodology of the study includes documentary analyses, fieldwork, and interviews, with the results being presented in the form of descriptive analysis. The findings reveal that the two countries' educational decentralization policies share many similarities at the macro level; however, they have some dissimilarities with regard to details and functions. Both countries have enacted laws and regulations to drive their educational decentralization policies. When it comes to implementation at the macro level and central and local planning, Thailand and South Korea have both organized structures and assigned responsibilities connected to educational decentralization that conform to the values of independence and flexibility. This research explores South Korea's success in educational decentralization, which has been enabled by political, economic, and social factors. Finally, this research offers recommendations for Thailand to develop its policy towards educational decentralization based on the success stories from South Korea.

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Introduction

In the contemporary era of globalization, the circulation of information and communication technologies (ICT) have created a "knowledge-based society" defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2005) as a society that is nurtured by its diversity and its capacities. To survive in such a society, the improvement of human resources, education and adaptive skills are keys for countries around the world in maintaining their competitiveness and development in political, economic and social spheres.

Thailand recognizes this global challenge and has launched measures to develop human resources and potential. One of these measures, driven by globalization, intention of the Constitution 1997 and the National Education Act 1999, (Office of the National Education Commission, 2002), is the transfer of authority over education to local administrations. However, this decentralization has been subject to both opposition and some misunderstanding, which has become a major obstacle to decentralizing educational authority and is seriously hindering progress. Between 2006 and 2010, only 449 schools out of a total of 31,508 schools were transferred to local administration, accounting for 1.43 percent of schools,

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and only 54 additional schools were transferred to local administration in 2011 (Office of the Decentralization to the Local Administrative Organization committee, 2013). Thailand's "Proposal for a Second Decade of Education Reform 2009–2018" remains one of the priorities with regard to administrative and management systems (Office of the Education Council, 2009).

South Korea is one of the most highly developed countries in Asia. It has succeeded in education reform and achieved competitive capability. These achievements represent the outcome of a vision that considers education an important element for economic and social development. The Korean government has sustained and maintained the course of its educational reform, including teacher development, curriculum improvement, promotion of the educational community, encouragement of participation, and education management in response to the requirements of today's knowledge society and the need for life-long learning (Ka, 2006; Lee, 2008), with particular focus given to decentralizing educational authority in favor of local administration – a practice that the country has been committed to since the late 1980s.

This research examines the implementation of educational decentralization policies at the macro level in Thailand and South Korea by comparing their law enforcement, regulations and strategic plans, as well as organizational structures and functions. This paper also explores successful lessons learned from South Korea's experience and offers recommendations that can be applied in Thailand, considering the needs for consistency and compatibility.

Literature Review

Decentralization is a global phenomenon (Suwanmala & Weist, 2009). Rondinelli (1999) defines decentralization as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate government organizations. There are three major forms and degrees of decentralization. The first is de-concentration, or the transfer of tasks and work, but not authority, to other units within an organization. The second is delegation, or the transfer of decision-making authority from higher to lower units. The third is devolution, or the transfer of authority to the next lowest unit so it may operate independently (Hanson, 1997). Suwanmala and Weist (2009) point out that decentralization should include three components: a clear division of responsibilities (who does what), adequate financing, and a clear accountability system. Decentralization has been further discussed by several theorists who have demonstrated its emergence from administrative, political, and ideological perspectives (Fisk, 1996; Lauglo & McLean, 1985; McGinn & Welsh, 1999). The view of decentralization that emerges from an administrative perspective is influenced by the business sector and considered a more effective means of maintaining an organization's competitiveness. By contrast, the political perspective on decentralization includes three types of motives. First, decentralization can emerge in a bottom-up manner from people at local levels. This might be an attempt to diffuse public responsibility. Second, decentralization may be used as a political strategy to cope with conflict or strengthen the central government's political power. Finally, decentralization can have an ideological basis as a reflection of principles of self-sufficiency in a rural society where individuals have achieved full development through engaging in their society's everyday activities.

This study is specifically concerned with *educational decentralization*. After all, decentralization covers a wide range of fields of study, and one of the most difficult of these fields is decentralization in education (Suwanmala & Weist, 2009). The basic concept of educational decentralization concerns the transfer of authority from those at one location or level in educational organization to those at another level (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). Brown (as cited in Siridhrungsri, 2003) further explains that educational decentralization involves the transfer of educational responsibility and decision-making authority from a central authority to a lower level within the organization. Educational decentralization can be organized into three categories (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). De-concentration is the transfer of authority over the implementation of rules or management responsibilities to a lower level, which remains under the central government's control. Delegation occurs when the central government lends authority to the lower levels of organizational units. Finally, devolution is the permanent transfer of authority over educational matters from higher to lower levels of government. Behrman, Deolalikar and Soon (2002) emphasize that the most important aspect of educational decentralization is the devolution of authority over spending, staffing, and educational content from the central government to a local level of government. Educational decentralization projects aim to accelerate economic development, increase management efficiency, redistribute financial responsibility, increase democratization through power distribution, neutralize the power of the centre, and improve education quality (Hanson, 1997).

Policy implementation is broadly defined as "what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action" (O'Toole, 2000). Edward and Sharkansky (1978) state that policy implementation means giving order as well as direction to fulfill the order and the related activities such as signing agreement contracts, founding the organization, hiring officers, and assigning missions. Barrett (2004) further argues that it is the process of translating policy into action while Pressman and Wildavsky (1973, as cited in Pulzl & Treib, 2007) said that implementation comprises "interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieve them."

Chantarasorn (2011) stated that policy implementation can be divided into two levels: macro and micro implementation. The macro level is involved with high-level government agencies and covers the two processes of translating policy into an action plan and policy adoption by regional and local authorities. Meanwhile, the micro level involves implementation of central government policy by local

authorities. Berman (1978) proposed that implementing policy involves two classes of problems. The central government executes its policy to influence local delivery organizations to behave in desired way; this is referred to as "macro-implementation problems". In response to the central action, the local organizations have to devise and carry out their own internal policies; these are "micro-implementation problems". The essential difference between the process of micro and macro implementation arises from their distinct institutional settings. The setting for micro-implementation is a local delivery organization, whereas the setting for macro-implementation is an entire policy sector spanning from central to local levels.

Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted through various techniques, including documentary analysis, interviews, and fieldwork in order to assure completeness of the study through data triangulation. The overall research was undertaken in two phases, the first in 2013–2014, and the second in 2015–2016. This paper focuses on the first phase, which involved studying the top level of policy implementation, concentrating on the macro context, from legislation to organizational structure and function of basic education levels. In collecting data, 10 key informants, selected by purposive sampling, were interviewed. Researchers also organized fieldwork, which involved visiting seven local institutions. As a result, data were gathered from a range of policy-relevant stakeholders covering the central implementer and local practitioners, including scholars who are experts in political science and public administration (See Table 1). The research tools used were structured interviews, field notes, and a comparison table. Data from documents were analysed by content analysis together with data gained from primary sources. Results and discussion are presented using the descriptive analysis approach.

Results and Discussion

Law enforcement, regulation and strategic plan: This research demonstrates that Thailand and South Korea share a common feature in their regulation, law enforcement and strategies for educational decentralization. Both countries consider these mechanisms for the promotion of educational decentralization policies to be important, and recognize that the principle of independence is a key strategic tool for achieving educational decentralization.

In Thailand, the National Education Act 1999 and Amendments (No. 2) 2002 affirm the decentralization of authority to the local administrations. This act also focuses on local administrations' educational administration and management, where local administrations have the right to provide education at all levels in accordance with their readiness, suitability, and local requirements. The Ministry of Education prescribes criteria and procedures for assessing the readiness of local administrations to provide education. The ministry also assesses the local administration's capabilities in providing education and advises on budget allocation. The Determining Plans and Processes of Decentralization to the Local Administration Act was implemented in 1999 and the Ministerial Regulations on Decentralization of Educational Administration and Management in 2007. These are the major regulations and strategies implemented to promote educational decentralization in Thailand.

In South Korea, an educational decentralization policy entitled the Local Education Self-Governing System (LESGS) was ratified in the constitution. Article 31 guarantees the principles of independence, professionalism and political impartiality in education (Kim, 2006). LESGS also covers an additional four major principles: decentralization, stakeholder participation, educational management independence and professional management. The Education Act and Law for Local Education Self-Governance (1991) stipulate that the central government must transfer the mission for educational management to local governments in cities and provinces.

Table 1   Key informants for interviews and local organizations for fieldwork

Thailand	South Korea
Key informants for interviews	
1. A representative of the decentralization committee for Local Administrative Organization	1. A chair of Seoul Jongno-gu Office Childcare Policy Commission (a former supervisor of Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education)
2. A specialist in public service management and local education at Department of Local Administration	2. Director of The School attached to Seoul National University of Education
3. President of the Sub-district Administrative Organization of Thailand	3. Department Manager of Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education Designate of Youth Career Training Support Center
4. A secretariat of the Thai Council for Alternative Education	4. An expert in political science at Korea University
5. An expert in Korean studies from university	5. An emeritus Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.
Local administrations for study visit and fieldwork	
1. Chonburi Provincial Administration Organization	1. Gangkuk Youth Center of the Metropolis of Seoul
2. Phuket City Municipality	2. The Elementary School attached to Seoul National University of Education
3. Ban Saeo Subdistrict Administrative Organization, Chiang Rai province	3. Two Seoul Metropolitan Government affiliated schools; Kaepo Elementary School and Kaewon Middle school

Organizational structure and function: Both countries use a hierarchical organizational structure based on the principles of independence and flexibility. Remarkably, South Korea affirms the principles of participation, professionalism and independence.

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Interior are responsible for supervising the standards and quality of educational management in local areas. In 2003 the Ministry of Education divided its educational territories into educational service areas. These were formed to support educational decentralization, strengthen unity, enhance efficiency and effectiveness, and maintain school quality and standards (Ministry of Education, 2003). The educational service area also works with local administrations to promote and support educational management to meet national education standards and follow the appropriate policies. Thailand emphasizes School-Based Management for Local Development (SBMLD). This model allows schools to manage their own academic concerns, budgets, human resources and administration. In addition, teachers work to provide diverse learning resources and encourage community participation in order to meet local demand. Under the concept of decentralization, the community also plays a vital role in educational management by voicing local demands, and participating in and supporting the learning process at schools.

South Korea divides its organizational structure into two parts. The main organizational structure consists of organizations at the national, local and school levels. The secondary organizational structure for educational reform advocacy consists of committees (Office of the Education Council, 2006). The Ministry of Education holds exclusive responsibility for guaranteeing the quality of education, and supporting and managing basic education for cities and local areas as well as implements School-Based Management (SBM). In addition, since 1988, South Korea has had an Advisory Council for Educational Policy to examine and advise the Ministry on educational development policies. The Presidential Commission on Education Reform was appointed in 1989 to advise the president on educational development

policies. The Local Education Office and the Board of Education are the two main organizations that deal with educational management in local areas. The Local Education Office in each city and in each province has a duty to manage education in its own area and to maintain independence from other organizations. The duties include general management, budget planning and human resource management. The Board of Education makes decisions concerning education. Half of its members are selected in local elections. Other members are drawn from each city or province's local council. The school council consists of elected representatives of the parents, community members, teachers and administrative personnel. The school council has a duty to consider schools matters such as budgets, curriculum improvement, the development of extracurricular activities and the deepening of cooperation between schools and surrounding communities. The comparative analysis of educational decentralization between the two countries is shown in Table 2.

As the research revealed, South Korea has given priority to sustaining education standards. Importantly, the quality of education managed by local organizations is not inferior to that managed by the central government. According to the education assessment, empirical evidence shows that South Korea often places at the top of Asia and the world. In 2014, South Korea was ranked first in Pearson's educational ranking (Coughlan, 2014) and third in the OECD's categorization of school performance (Graham, 2015). South Korea is thus recognized for the quality of education management and is ranked highly in school system management in the OECD, with consistently excellent learning scores (PISA) (Mani, 2018). Similar to the other developed countries such as Canada, Sweden and Denmark, Korea has implemented educational decentralization and public participation as a primary objective in education development (Chareonwongsak, 2013). Several additional studies have verified positive correlation between educational decentralization and its outcomes. Heredia-Ortiz (2006) found that educational decentralization can improve learning achievement and reduce primary school repetition and drop-out rates. Likewise,

Table 2 Comparison of educational decentralization in Thailand and South Korea

Issues	Thailand	South Korea
Law enforcement, regulation and strategic plan		
	1. The National Education Act 1999 and the later the related Local Administration Acts and regulations	1. Assuring educational decentralization in the 1987 constitution and the Education Act and the Law for Local Education Self Government in 1991
	2. Efforts to transfer authority to local administrations	2. Transferring educational management authority to local areas completely
	3. Challenging of transferring authority over schools to local administrations in practice	3. Adhering to the principles of independence, flexibility and good governance
Organizational structures and functions		
At the ministerial level	Ministry of Education and Ministry of Interior supervise standards and quality of educational management.	Ministry of Education guarantees education quality, supporting and managing basic education.
At the regional level	The educational service area administers and supports local administrations.	Provinces/metropolises supervised by the local elected governor.
At the local level	Local administrations and schools gain independence to manage education.	Local education office in districts/ counties gain independence in education management and has flexibility in proactive decision-making
At the school level	Emphasizing SBMLD model	Implementing SBM model

Galiani and Schargrodsky (2002) found that decentralization in education leads to a statistically significant increase in the exam scores of local students.

Notably, as a result of democratic development, South Korea does not centralize its power; authority is decentralized to localities with regard to both independence and responsibility. This has allowed the country to implement the educational decentralization policy with steadiness and seriousness. Another highlight has been the expansion of actual opportunity for local stakeholder participation, supported by evidence such as holding satisfactory assessment of parents and students. If the results are positive, the Local Administration will merit consideration of a top-up grant from the central government (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). Other evidence of policy success is that private sector subsidies to local education account for 9–10 percent of the total budget (including tuition fees collected from students), known as "Independent Incomes" (Office of the Education Council, 2006).

By contrast, Chiangkun (2016) has argued that Thailand remains a centralized bureaucratic system and functions with restrictions on regulations and orders. The result is that local educational management administrators still face problems and challenges decades after initial policy adoption and implementation. As Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization [SEAMEO] (2001) declared, the concept of decentralization being the best way to administer the education development efforts has been widely deliberated. While decentralization has become a common goal of education reform in several countries, it is a difficult mission to accomplish.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As a result of the study, it can be summarized that Thailand and South Korea consider law enforcement, regulations and strategic plans as essential mechanisms for promoting educational decentralization policies. Thailand has enacted laws such the National Education Act 1999 and the later Local Administration Acts and regulations in an effort to adhere to the principle of independence. Likewise, in South Korea, the Local Education Self-Governing System was ratified in the 1987 constitution. This system also covers an additional four major principles of decentralization, stakeholder participation, educational management, and independence and professional management. To implement the policy at the macro level, both countries have hierarchical structures that originate with the central authority and end at the schools. Each level has a specific function and especially for South Korea, it is free from political interference.

The successful stories of South Korea in its educational decentralization can be very beneficial for countries seeking to learn about and adopt best practices. This comparative research thus concludes with recommendations for Thailand based on the lessons learned from South Korea. They are: 1) The government should accelerate decentralization to localities and decrease its centralization, as well as allow local councils and communities to undertake a check and balance system; this will resolve problems and meet demands in localities; 2) Thailand needs to reform its public administration, decrease centralization of its organizational structure, establish a reform commission and shift away from the regional administration to local administrative organizations; 3) Administrative systems need to expand opportunities for practical local stakeholder participation, including local administrations and other stakeholders such as parents, communities, the private sector, and civil society; and 4) The government should amend laws and regulations to facilitate decentralization of authority to the localities, particularly regulation of school transfer.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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