University Sport and Policy Reform in China: Understanding the Implementation of Policy in Universities

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Governance/Policy - Policy (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2017-237

Friday, June 2, 2017
2:15 PM
Room: Columbia

Introduction
Recent developments in the context of higher education have led to an increased interest in the development of sport provision. China is a typical example. On the one hand, the government urges universities to offer more sporting opportunities to their students for the purpose of building a healthy nation by providing more policy and financial support. On the other hand, there has been a deterioration of physical fitness and an increased prevalence of overweight and obesity in adolescent in the past decade in China. With reference to policy implementation, one possible explanation for the current trend is a lack of understanding of the complexity of the policy enactment environments. Yet, in the literature, there is remarkably little bottom-up study of policy implementation that examines how universities and other micro-level implementers react to macro level policies. Therefore, this study aims to provide an empirical account of the complexities of the relations between policy and practice in universities in China.

The publication of two policy statements by China Ministry of Education in 2014, i.e. Standards for Sport and Physical Education (PE) in Higher Education Institutions and Standards for Students Health and Fitness, are significant in shaping university sport and PE development in China. They not only reinforce the requirement of delivering compulsory PE sessions for Year 1 and Year 2 students, also explicitly indicate that students who cannot pass the fitness test before their graduation will only be awarded ordinary degrees. Importantly, they require that any college or university who fails to meet the standards and whose students’ physical health and fitness levels are on the decline for three consecutive years would be marked as Fail in their teaching assessment.

It is against this background that our research unfolds. The research aims to examine, from sports staff and PE teachers’ point of view, how they perceive the role of sport and the fitness tests for university students, and their reactions to and perspectives on the recent changes at the macro level of policies.

Theoretical Framework and Method
While there are studies investigated the issue of the role of the state in the development and implementation of policy cycle (Dale, 1992; Sfee, 1995) versus the role of individual players at the service specific level (Ball, 1990; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Fulcher, 1989), Ball’s (1990) framework for education policy analysis is adopted for this study given the focus of the paper is localised at the impact of ideology of localised players in specific sites. Focuses on the micro-level of policy analysis, Ball suggests that it is important to understand the ways in which education policy is conceived of and discussed at school level, that which actually occurs, and the limits of the possible. Particularly, it is recognised that teachers have had to reconstruct their identities in response to the change of education system and policy.

Therefore, a case-study, qualitative research method is adopted in study. Specifically, in-depth interviews method is used with sports staff and PE teachers from the selected four case universities in Tianjin. As ‘policy actors’ (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011), senior sports staff and PE teachers from the Sport Department of each university are interviewed. The sampling strategy is to recruit at least one senior member of staff from the Sport Department and a few PE teachers until data saturation occurs in each case. Thus, there are a total of 20, average hour-long, semi-structured interviews conducted. Interview questions ranges from their views on the role of sport and PE for university students, the role of fitness tests, and their experiences, priority, strategies, barriers of delivering sport and PE at universities.
To supplement the interview data, document analysis of national and regional policies and universities’ strategies for sport is also adopted to support data analysis.

Results and discussion
While we recognise that policy implementation differs according to local condition, resources and personnel commitment, there seemed to be strong consensus among interviewees in this study that, firstly, although the profile of developing university sport has been raised in all the case universities, the role of sport remains relatively low at the university level in comparison with other core university activities, receiving less funding, resources and strategic attention. Second, although the central government does have control over the curriculum, universities are operating in their own ways at the local level and are not necessarily penalised (yet) for not following government standards for PE and university sport. Third, the recent launched national policies on university sport development are not ‘translated’ clearly to sports staff and PE teachers, with a majority reporting that they ‘have carried out their jobs as normal’. While they are aware of the change of national policy in general, they are unclear about the detailed change and/or unwilling to change; only a small proportion of PE teachers respond that they have adapted the teaching materials to fit their local contexts of implementation. Fourth, there is a general lack of accountability of delivering extra-curriculum sport activities or meeting the fitness status objectives in the Sport Departments. From this study, we argue that it is important to gain sports staff’s insights into the extent to which genuine participation by teachers in university sport reform is possible, and their voice provides a key to understanding the perennial problem of the transformation of policy change from conception to implementation.