

Reflections on Education Groups at Basic Education Level in China

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Abstract: *In the context of China's education reform, the education group emerges as a new form of school organization designed to equalize access to high-quality educational resources. While this increasingly popular mode of school running has achieved notable results in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, among other cities, there are concerns about the problems it engenders, such as severe homogenization and poor group management. The purpose of this paper is to examine the causes, outcomes, and problems of education groups and to propose solutions to existing problems, as well as to provide references for future school alliance development.*

Science Insights Education Frontiers 2022; 11(2):1595-1601.

Doi: 10.15354/sief.22.re059

How to Cite: Zhu, H. (2022). Reflections on education groups at basic education level in China. Science Insights Education Frontiers, 11(2):1595-1601.

Keywords: *Education Group, Educational Equality, Core School, Basic Education*

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Conflict of Interests: None

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AMONG the many negative repercussions of urbanization, “school picking” (the practice of enrolling in a school outside one’s allotted school district) has developed into a severe issue that confounds the entire community. The primary cause of school selection is an imbalance in the development of advantaged and disadvantaged schools. Educational equality has become a critical objective for the government and the entire population. Numerous changes and strategies have been tested around the country to maximize the efficacy of existing high-quality educational resources. The most effective of these is the establishment of education groups in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, among other places. In China, an “education group” is an association of two or more schools that share common educational concepts, are contractually tied, and were formed to achieve a certain scale effect. Based on a review of current statistics and literature, this study provides an overview of the causes, outcomes, and challenges facing educational groups with the goal of eliciting additional observations on educational equity.

Causes of Education Groups

Disparities in the quality of basic education exist throughout China, and the “siphon” phenomenon is so pervasive that it even operates between different districts within a city. In education, the siphon effect refers to the movement of students and teachers from economically depressed places to those with a high concentration of superior educational resources (Wan & Chen, 2022). For example, Beijing and Tianjin, as the dual core cities of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Economic Zone, have amassed unique economic conditions and high-quality educational resources, creating a powerful siphon effect on Hebei Province’s instructors and pupils. As a result of the continual inflow of competent teachers and bright students, the prestigious schools in Beijing and Tianjin have become stronger, while the less advantaged schools in Hebei Province have lost professors and students, exacerbating the disparities between different places (Yan, 2016). In this context, education groups are formed to foster collaboration between affluent and impoverished schools in order to ensure the balanced development of basic education.

In major cities, an education group is often organized around a prestigious school (also known as a “core school”), with other member schools (also known as “ordinary schools”) serving as branch campuses. Throughout the cooperation period, the core school will send a few administrators and anchor teachers to its branch campuses to provide teaching guidance and teacher training. Teachers will be able to broaden their horizons, update their ideas, and improve their professional level through exchanges with peers in other schools organized by the group. As a result, the availability of high-quality educational resources is increased, and the overall quality of member schools is raised.

The Outcomes of Education Groups

Enhancing the Overall Education Quality of Member Schools in the Group

Education groups facilitate the sharing of high-quality resources, the interchange of management skills, and the coordination of instructional research. To begin with, government backing helps to increase the effectiveness of education organizations. For example, to ensure the organizations' effective operation, the Shanghai government has published a variety of laws regarding funding, performance appraisal, and teacher recruitment. Second, school grouping unifies the resources of all member schools and facilitates the sharing of high-quality educational resources, collaborative teaching research and curriculum change, and teacher rotation. For instance, X Education Group in Shanghai utilizes the group's curriculum research center to coordinate curriculum research, implementation, and evaluation, with the goal of developing an advanced curriculum system for the entire group. Finally, education groups' principal objective is to raise the educational quality of their member schools. School grouping significantly lowers educational gaps between schools and contributes to regional education quality balance; the group's quality assessment center can monitor student academic performance and learning processes by standardizing evaluation techniques for all member schools (Zhang & Chen, 2018).

Improving Teachers' Job Satisfaction and Professional Competence

The majority of teachers have a strong sense of identity with the group and confidence in its future, and their personal planning is closely aligned with the group's development vision, which considerably enhances the alliance's cohesion. Through positive interactions, they are able to maintain harmonious relationships with their peers at other member schools, and the group also serves as a learning community for teachers and has significantly increased their development space, alleviating competition among teachers in a single school and significantly improving interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the education organization can leverage anchor teachers' effects throughout all member schools. The anchor teachers' skills and experience can be shared throughout schools through demonstration lessons, teaching research programs, cooperative lesson preparation, and other activities. This benefits other teachers' professional growth. Tu (2018) examined 175 instructors representing three distinct educational groupings in Shanghai's Jing'an District. The findings indicate that more than 90% of teachers believe their teaching and research abilities have improved since their schools joined the group; 89.7% believe their disciplinary knowledge has increased; 88.6% believe their teaching performance has improved; and 86.9% believe their educational concepts have changed. Additional research demonstrates that membership in educational groups benefits teachers' instructional approaches and outcomes as well as their professional knowledge and competence.

Facilitating Student Comprehensive Development

The education group spreads the core school's reasonably sophisticated educational philosophy and modern classroom culture to other member schools. Under the guidance of innovative teaching approaches, teachers will place a greater emphasis on the development of students' higher-order thinking skills rather than only on their test scores. Inter-school contacts have dismantled long-standing barriers to resource sharing, allowing students to access a variety of learning modes and high-quality courses, as well as participate in extracurricular activities with their peers (Zhang, 2019). Additionally, inter-school communication strengthens students' sense of belonging to the educational community, accelerating the formation of group culture. For instance, Zhengzhou No. 96 Middle School and Zhengzhou Huimin Middle School collaborate to form a school district alliance. To increase student interaction and develop their overall competence, the two schools co-hosted the first-ever middle school student maker culture festival in Zhengzhou City. The festival featured five major competitions, including robotics innovation, aircraft models, small inventions, original microfilms, and innovative sports and art. The festival provided students with a big display platform, an opportunity to participate in practical activities, discover their passions, exercise their creativity, and feel the joy that comes from the marriage of modern technology and creativity (Zhengdong Platform, 2016).

Relieving the Fever of "School Picking"

With urbanization, the demand for high-quality education increases, worsening the fever of school choice. Major cities in China have employed education groups to address a lack of high-quality education resources, significantly alleviating public anxiety about child schooling. According to Zhou (2005), the establishment of education groups has made "prestigious schools" accessible to ordinary people in Hangzhou's Xiacheng District. The change benefited 90 percent of the district's students and significantly reduced the gap between supply and demand for high-quality education.

Problems Faced by Education Groups

The Imposition of Core Schools' Culture on Non-Core Schools in the Education Group May Obliterate the Latter's Individualities

Certain educational facilities attempt to mechanically recreate the culture of core schools in non-core schools, eventually eradicating the latter's cultural heritage, great traditions, and historical traces (Zhang, 2019). Eliminating the distinctive characteristics of non-core schools will result in an undue homogenization of the group's member schools.

Ordinary Schools Have Difficulty Applying the Educational Philosophy of Prestigious Schools

The education group's primary aim is to enhance the professional competence of ordinary school teachers. Coordinated teaching research, cooperative lesson preparation, teacher exchange, and job rotation among member schools are common strategies used by the core school to support the professional development of non-core school teachers. These measures, however, are ineffective due to disparities in teacher ability and student competence among member schools. It takes time for ordinary school teachers to fully grasp the core school's frontier educational theories. Likewise, the lack of autonomous learning ability among ordinary school students makes it difficult for their teachers to apply the advanced teaching methods learned through coordinated teaching research and cooperative lesson preparation to classroom instruction. Without a connection to the actual circumstances or needs of regular schools, the core school's experience will benefit neither teachers nor students at non-core schools (Li, 2016).

The Management of the Core School Lacks the Motivation to Sustain the Running of the Group

The education group is frequently founded by the principal of the core school, who is driven by his or her objectives for the cause of education, namely, to universalize high-quality education and to support the balanced development of fundamental education (Zhu, 2006). However, several complications may occur as a result of the education group's foundation. Blind expansion disperses the core school's resources and may degrade educational quality; the primary objective of the education group is to expand access to high-quality educational resources, which requires significant financial investment and human capital input from the core school. The government evaluates an education group primarily on the basis of the core school's performance, which adds an additional burden to the core school's management. These obstacles put their fortitude to the test.

Suggestions for Systematic Improvement of Education Groups

To Establish Equal and Democratic Relationships among Member Schools of the Group

The core school's equitable and democratic connection with the group's other ordinary schools is critical for inter-school engagement and cooperation. By making member schools less sensitive to the disparity in their strengths, it is possible to increase each school's passion and initiative in contributing to the group's progress. It is strongly rec-

ommended that a standing committee be formed. Composed of the leaders of member schools, it can act as the group's main decision maker, writing the charter and overseeing the organization's general planning, as well as facilitating collaboration among group members. As the educational group's originator, the core school must also strengthen its teamwork, communication, and negotiation skills. It should have a specialized information transmission mechanism in place to quickly reply to inquiries from non-core institutions. Moreover, the core school should raise awareness of the importance of involving other schools in significant decision-making so that they can play a constructive and proactive part in the group's reform (Cao, 2018).

To Strengthen Team Building for the Whole Education Group

Excellent teachers are the group's and school's most valuable assets. The group should develop incentive systems to promote teacher rotation between schools. While sending anchor instructors to member schools helps improve the group's overall teaching quality, it is equally critical for teachers from less advantaged schools to receive training at the core school in order to master advanced teaching models and methodologies. Moreover, an education group founded around a prominent school has the benefit of attracting highly qualified teachers to bolster the group's teaching staff. Additionally, by leveraging current educational technologies, the education group may optimize the impact of the anchor teaching team. It can develop an online resource sharing platform that incorporates high-quality courses from all member schools and allows students to access them at any time and from any location regardless of their school affiliation (Li & Meng, 2016).

To Win Government Support for Education Groups

Education groups are formed to equalize access to basic education for the general good. The government owes them policy and financial support. Most crucially, the government should cover a portion of the group's operational costs to alleviate pressure on the core school, which is in charge of the group's overall operation. It should recognize teachers who devote their careers to developing underprivileged schools with prizes or welfare benefits. Local educational authorities should provide special financing to principals who have made significant contributions to the development of educational groups (Zhang, 2017).

Conclusions

China encourages the establishment of basic education groups, and cites it as a critical tool for achieving educational equity and equality. Modern education necessitates more collaboration and exchange between schools. In comparison to past inter-school "shallow cooperation," the education group is a form of contractual "deep cooperation" be-

tween prestigious and non-prestigious schools, a novel experiment in school administration. How to foster cooperation among member schools without jeopardizing the distinctive characteristics of each individual school and creating motivation for the education group's continuous development warrants more study.

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Received: 25 March 2022

Revised: 11 April 2022

Accepted: 14 April 2022