

Policies and Practices for Promoting Inter-school Cooperation in Primary and Secondary Schools in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the policy and practice of inter-school cooperation between primary and secondary schools in China, exploring cooperation models such as education groups, school alliances and school clusters, and their role in facilitating the sharing of educational resources and improving the quality of education. In particular, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region is used as a case study to demonstrate how these modes of co-operation have helped to balance regional educational resources and improve educational standards. The article points out that although inter-school cooperation has made progress in enhancing education quality and promoting education equity, it still faces challenges such as uneven distribution of resources and insufficient depth of cooperation. This article suggests optimising the effectiveness of inter-school cooperation by clarifying the goals of cooperation, strengthening the mechanisms of cooperation, and promoting equal and mutually beneficial partnerships as a means of promoting the continuous improvement and development of China's education system.

KEYWORDS

Inter-school; collaborative learning; policy; equity

1 Introduction

Inter-school cooperation is now an vital educational policy in China, and is receiving increasing attention in the field of primary and secondary education. At the same time, it has proved to be an effective way of integrating educational resources and sharing experiences between schools, which is crucial for promoting the balanced development of education among different regions of China and improving the quality of education in general.

Conceptually, there is no uniform definition of intercollegiate cooperation in China. Chen (2008) believes that any cooperative action that shares a common goal through joint efforts at the inter-school level can be called inter-school cooperation. This paper argues that inter-school cooperation refers to the interconnected behaviours and processes established in the form of contracts or agreements between two or more schools or groups of schools with equal strengths or complementary needs, based on the strategic goals of better adapting to the needs of social development and common use of resources, in terms of sharing educational resources, joint training of talents, and joint construction of materials (Wu, 2020). Therefore, from the perspective of the subject of cooperation, inter-school cooperation between primary and secondary schools includes both cooperation between primary and secondary schools, as well as cooperation between primary education groups and education unions.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance that the government attaches to

inter-school cooperation and the practical effects of the policy, this paper firstly describes the background to the formulation of the policy related to inter-school cooperation in primary and secondary schools in China and its objectives. The second part focuses on its concrete implementation in China. Various modes of cooperation, such as education groups, inter-school alliances and school clusters, are introduced and analyzed, with a focus on the case of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. The advantages of inter-school cooperation and the positive impact it has had on education in China are illustrated in these sections. The final part of the article analyses the core problems in the implementation process, discusses the impact of inter-school cooperation on strong and weak schools, and offers suggestions and improvement strategies for future development in response to these problems. This paper aims to provide theoretical value to the deepening of China's education system reform and the promotion of education equity by studying the formation and implementation of inter-school cooperation policy and its impact on education.

2 Development of inter-school cooperation policy

The construction and formulation of inter-school cooperation policies for primary and secondary schools in China is based on the background and needs of China's education reform. Since the reform and opening up, China's education system has been continuously improved, yet to this day the problems of uneven distribution of education resources and unbalanced quality of education still exist, especially in the geographical and urban-rural gaps (Wen & Gu, 2017). As a result, high-quality and balanced has become a new goal for the development of compulsory education and a prominent feature in building a new pattern of compulsory education (Kou & Zong, 2023). In view of the current situation and problems faced by compulsory education schools, in order to achieve education balance, education fairness, and ensure the quality of education, it is necessary to follow the laws of education, under the command of the scientific concept of development, and actively explore effective and practical ways (Zhang et al., 2017). Inter-school cooperation is seen as an effective means of addressing inter-school disparities, promoting balanced educational development and improving the quality of education (Chapman & Muijs, 2014).

The Chinese government has begun to focus on the role of inter-school cooperation in primary and secondary schools, incorporating it as part of its education reform. Inter-school cooperation is a requirement for education in today's China as set out in the Outline of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Education Programme (2007), which also encourages the establishment of co-operative relationships between schools and the joint development of various projects. The Modernization of Education in China 2035 (2019) suggests that achieving the modernization of education is an important part of China's second 100-year goal and will help lead China to build a modern socialist country in all aspects. As such, the formulation and implementation of relevant policies is of great importance.

China's policy on inter-school cooperation in primary and secondary schools is designed to achieve a number of objectives. To begin with, to improve the efficiency of the use of educational resources. The integration and sharing of educational resources between schools through collaboration enables these resources to be more effectively utilized by teachers and students in their educational and teaching activities. Yang (2015) stated that this avoids wastage of resources whilst enabling more efficient use of educational resources and maximizing benefits. Furthermore, it is out of the need to improve the quality of education. Through inter-school cooperation to promote the exchange and sharing of educational experiences between schools, teachers can learn useful educational experiences and use them in the classroom, which is conducive to enhancing the quality of education in schools and improving the effectiveness of schooling (Zhang et al., 2017).

Lastly, the policy on inter-school cooperation is meant to strengthen the mechanism of inter-school cooperation. Establishing and improving the policy mechanism of inter-school cooperation between primary and secondary schools encourages schools to carry out a variety of cooperation activities, such as sharing of educational equipment, exchange of teachers, exchange of students, etc., which promotes the common development and progress of schools. All of the above points will ultimately contribute to Chinese education and ultimately promote the vigorous development of education in China.

3 Implementation of inter-school cooperation policy in China

3.1 Types of practice in inter-school cooperation

There are three main types of inter-school cooperation in China: education groups, inter-school alliances and school clusters, and a variety of subtypes derived from them. Each type has its own unique strengths and weaknesses and conditions of applicability, reflecting different essences and connotations of cooperation.

3.1.1 Education Groups

Education groups can be specifically divided into the traditional "grouping of prestigious schools" and the new "formation of education groups by weak schools". The former refers to the cooperation between famous schools and weak schools. More specifically, it is to improve the education level of weak schools through brand export and resource integration without diluting the quality education resources of famous schools. The operation of basic education groups is a practice that meets the current national requirements for the balanced development of educational resources at the compulsory education stage. The policy of group-running of prestigious schools has become a mainstream choice for promoting the quality and balanced development of basic education in some developed provinces and urban areas in eastern China (Zhang & Cheng, 2018). Education groups promote the regeneration of high-quality educational resources through the sharing and exchange of internal educational resources. At the same time, with the help of rich experience in running schools and high-quality teachers, they provide effective leadership and assistance to weak schools, thereby activating the flow of educational resources within the group and constantly pursuing the balanced development of education (Chen, 2020). Typical examples can be found in the Hangzhou Qiuye Education Group, the Beijing Jiuzhong Education Group and the Nanjing Gulou District Five Primary Schools Education Group (Liang, 2013). Although this model is able to rapidly raise the educational level of weak schools, it also suffers from the problems of government domination and resource inequality. The latter refers to the cooperation between weak schools. It adopts a federal management model, with member schools retaining their independent status to achieve quality and balanced development through complementary advantages. A typical example is the Yindu District in Anyang, Henan Province, which formed an education group of three weak schools in its neighbourhood in 2010 (Yuan, 2013). Although this model may suffer from a looser organisational structure and localism, it pursues balanced school growth and is worth further exploration and practice (Hu, 2017).

3.1.2 Inter-school alliances

There are also two main forms of inter-school alliances. The first is the "Strong Schools" + "Strong Schools" combination, which according to Du (2009) is aimed at achieving quality development of schools. The second form is the "urban (high-quality) schools" + "rural (weak) schools" alliance,

which aims at the balanced development of education. In the "strong alliance" type of inter-school cooperation, schools achieve homogeneity and mutual reinforcement, and promote the improvement of education standards through resource sharing. A typical example is the five-school alliance in Southern Jiangsu Province (Zhang, 2009). In contrast, the alliance cooperation between urban and rural schools focuses more on solving the regional imbalance in education development. This model has been adopted in both urban and rural education interactive development alliances in Chengdu (Zhao, 2014). This form of alliance aims to achieve a balanced development of education, and is a practice of "shared education balance".

3.1.3 School clusters

The model of school clusters exists mainly within a region, but cross-regional and national practices also exist. Xie (2015) pointed out that it is an approach initiated by the local education department to promote the progress of each school and achieve educational balance within a region through the principles of common discussion, sharing and win-win situation based on geographical proximity and heterogeneous development. Taking Shanghai Minhang District and Wuxi Beitang District as examples, they demonstrate the practice of school cluster cooperation in different regions of China, emphasizing their goal of educational symbiosis (Bu, 2015; Yang, 2009; Zhang, 2014). In addition, the model of "cross-regional school clusters" requires brand name schools to take the lead, with the support of the education sector, to achieve cross-regional mobility of quality educational resources through equal cooperation, resource sharing and autonomous development. Liao and Hua's (2010) study found that an affiliated primary school in Jiangsu Province had cross-regional cooperation with a total of 16 schools in eight other provinces and municipalities in the pursuit of education. Liao and Hua (2010) found that an affiliated primary school in Jiangsu Province cooperated with a total of 16 schools in eight other provinces and cities to pursue the goal of balanced education. These two models have their own characteristics, but both aim to promote win-win cooperation among schools and promote balanced development in education.

4 Case Study on Inter-school cooperation in Basic Education - An Example of Specific Practices in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region

Inter-regional inter-school cooperation has gradually become one of the most important ways to promote education development, so the Chinese government has formulated a series of policies to support and guarantee inter-regional inter-school cooperation. The main inter-regional cooperation included in China's national strategies include Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei co-operative development, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area construction, the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta region, and Pan-Pearl River Delta (PPRD) regional cooperation. In terms of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the Pan-Pearl River Delta Regional cooperation Framework Agreement and the Outline of the Pan-Pearl River Delta Regional cooperation and Development Plan (2006-2020), provide guidance on regional education cooperation. The Outline of the Plan for the Development of the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao (2019) further specifies specific measures to enhance exchange and cooperation in basic education, such as the conclusion of sister schools and the opening up of teacher training in Hong Kong and Macao. Based on these policies, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao have been making full use of their respective educational strengths through enhanced educational interactions and jointly innovating their talent cultivation models to meet the demand for high-end talents for regional economic and social

development (Lin et al., 2020). In addition, administrations across the Yangtze River Delta region have jointly undertaken projects such as establishing a quality resource sharing platform and developing a quality resource bank. This reflects the fact that quality improvement and balanced development of compulsory education is a matter of shared governance between provinces.

As one of the most developing regions in China, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has been attracting attention from all over the world with its unique geographical location and economic strength. In this region, educational cooperation is not only a means to boost local economic and social development, but also an effective way to strengthen the integration of educational resources within the region and optimize the environment for educational development. In recent years, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has made many breakthroughs in inter-school cooperation. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the case of inter-school cooperation in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

4.1 Improve the policy system and sound guarantee mechanism.

From the national policy to the relevant policies of the three provinces and cities of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, to the policy system of the education administration departments of the three provinces and cities, all of them have laid a solid foundation for inter-school cooperation in primary schools in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, and provided a good policy guarantee. The national-level policy "Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Synergistic Development Planning Outline (2015)" plans and emphasises the importance and strategic direction of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei synergistic development, providing guidance for inter-regional cooperation in compulsory education. The Outline of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2016) introduces for the first time a chapter on Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Co-operative Development, which provides more specific directions and objectives for inter-school cooperation in primary schools. In addition to this, the three provinces and cities have made their own arrangements and deployments, and have successively formulated opinions on the implementation of the Outline of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Co-operative Development Plan. All these provide institutional safeguards for cross-regional educational cooperation.

4.2 All-round inter-school cooperation in primary schools with the opportunity of synergistic development

4.2.1 Carrying out inter-school support

Inter-school support refers to the educational support provided by quality primary schools to relatively disadvantaged primary schools in terms of both hardware equipment and software, so as to achieve a balanced allocation of quality educational resources within the region. In 2008, Beijing Haidian Foreign Language Experimental School supported the expansion and renovation of the school building of Longmen Primary School in Laishui County, Hebei Province. Following the release of policies related to inter-school cooperation, educational assistance is also reflected in Beijing's counterpart support for Hebei's impoverished counties and assistance for the Xiongan New Area project. Such support includes signing cooperation agreements and carrying out hand-in-hand activities. Some primary schools have established friendships with other schools through colourful educational activities. For example, through the hand-in-hand fellowship activities and long-term inter-school teaching and research interactions, some schools have sent a large number of teaching aids, office supplies and books to other schools, thus promoting exchanges and friendship among teachers and students between schools. In addition, stable co-operative relationships have been formed among some schools, which have been continuously strengthened and developed in the ensuing decade or so (Wu, 2020). These activities have not only promoted the sharing of

educational resources and the enhancement of educational standards, but also enriched the extracurricular life of students.

4.2.2 Carrying out project cooperation

In order to enhance the effectiveness of cooperation, each school takes project exchange as the point of fit and focus of cooperation from its own practical point of view. This mode of cooperation takes project exchanges as a link, aiming to jointly promote education reform and improve teaching quality. For example, the Affiliated School of Baoding Normal and Beijing No.4 Middle School shared the results of education information; some schools set up an inter-school alliance to jointly promote the reform of the quality of classroom teaching; and some schools formed an Olympic Education Alliance to jointly promote Olympic education and sports activities in schools. These project cooperations aim to improve the quality of education and promote in-depth inter-school cooperation and resource sharing.

In summary, inter-school cooperation, as an crucial way of balanced development of regional compulsory education, plays a key and irreplaceable role in promoting the collaborative development of compulsory education in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei.

5 Core Issues and Improvement Strategies for Inter-school cooperation in China

Whilst inter-school cooperation has been effective in a number of ways, there are issues that need to be taken into account. UK experts Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) worried that it has become popular because it is trendy, rather than due to the benefits it can bring on its own. If it is just about faddishness, the result is that these collaborations mainly remain at the superficial level of academic exchange, with few comparisons and enquiries that really delve into teaching and learning in the school classroom (Lin et al., 2020). Some collaborations may also suffer from uneven distribution of resources, resulting in the outcome of the collaboration not being able to maximize the benefits to all participating schools. In addition, due to the differences between schools, cultural, managerial, and pedagogical conflicts and barriers may arise in the collaborations. All these issues may affect the conduct of the cooperation.

The status relationship of cooperation members is an important factor affecting the direction of cooperation and its development prospects. Looking at the actual situation of inter-school cooperation in Chinese basic education, one of the most central problems is reflected in the excessive inter-school gap and unequal status of schools in the process of cooperation between strong and weak schools.

Stronger schools often overlook the nature of cooperation out of self-protection. Stronger schools have more quality educational resources, which are mainly related to the local economic development level and political system. For example, most schools in Beijing and Tianjin have reached a professional level of basic education and are at the forefront of the whole of China, thanks to their well-developed economies and their active exploration of the content of compulsory education. As a result, strong schools are usually more willing to co-operate with schools stronger than themselves in order to avoid the risk of dilution of the educational resources at their disposal. For example, Wu (2020) found that although schools in Beijing and Tianjin collaborate with schools in Hebei, they do not pay enough attention to Hebei or have enough awareness of serving Hebei. At the same time, in his interview, the headmaster of a school in Hebei also said that "they have reservations in the process of cooperation with our school".

Although Hill (2014) suggested that weak schools, especially rural schools, are the biggest beneficiaries of the alliance process because it changes their isolation, it also causes them problems.

Gap cooperation can achieve some short-term results and help weak schools to improve their educational standards, but in the long run, it tends to reinforce inter-school inequality and cause cultural disorientation and passive assimilation in weak schools. More specifically, some weak schools have chosen to "adsorptive integration" and simply transplanted the culture of high-quality schools due to their relatively backward level of operation and educational resources (Hu, 2017). This can lead to the strong invasion of quality school culture into weak schools, causing weak schools to lose their own characteristics, and ultimately leading to the gradual fading and disappearance of their own culture.

In order to address the above problems and further promote effective inter-school cooperation, some suggestions for solutions need to be made. Firstly, each school involved in the cooperation needs to define the objectives of the cooperation. The formation of common goals among the cooperating schools is an important factor in facilitating the progress of the cooperation. It is difficult to maximise the effectiveness of the collaboration if there is a mismatch between the collective goals and the goals of each individual school (Bell et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important for each participant to know why they want to collaborate, what they want and how the collaboration will help them achieve their goals before they collaborate. Du (2021) suggested that partnerships are more successful when they focus on a small number of key goals.

Moreover, for strong schools, they should realise the essence of cooperation, that is, to achieve common development through resource sharing and mutual help and cooperation. They should abandon the over-protection of their own resources and instead adopt an open mind to co-operate with other schools. Some cooperation may not necessarily bring them educational resources, but this does not mean that these activities are not worth persevering with as they also enrich the learning life of students to a certain extent. At the same time, strong schools need to pay more attention to and support their partners, respect the needs and characteristics of their partners, and establish a co-operative relationship based on equality and mutual benefits. They should listen fully to each other's views and suggestions, work together to formulate cooperation programmes, and give adequate support and assistance in the process of cooperation.

Finally, as for weak schools, it is essential to face up to the gap with strong schools, but also to gain confidence by tapping into their own strengths and resources. Ribchester and Edward (1998) suggested that cooperation is difficult to realize if one part of the school becomes a supplier and the other part is simply a receiver. The fact that both parties benefit from the partnership means that the relationship should not be seen as one-way but as equal partners. Local education administrations can cooperate with schools to take the initiative in developing, sorting out, integrating and utilizing their own unique resources, emphasizing the schools' own special expertise, enhancing their own attractiveness and enriching the opportunities for cooperation with other schools, thereby achieving mutual benefits for the partners.

To sum up, these initiatives will help to solve the current problems in inter-school cooperation and ultimately promote the cooperation in a smoother, deeper and more sustainable direction, contributing to the future of education in China.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation and effectiveness of the policy of inter-school cooperation between primary and secondary schools in China has shown a rich diversity, ranging from various forms of cooperation such as education groups, inter-school alliances and school clusters, to cases of cooperation between specific geographic areas such as the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. The emergence of these forms of cooperation reflects, on the one hand, the concern of the Chinese

Government and the education sector for the equity of education resources as well as the balanced development of education, and, on the other hand, demonstrates the enthusiasm of schools in various places for sharing resources and mutual assistance and cooperation. At the same time, it also means that the relevant policies are being supported and implemented.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the process of inter-school cooperation in Chinese primary and secondary schools faces a series of problems and challenges. Problems such as unequal status between strong and weak schools, unfair distribution of resources, and failure to maximize the results of cooperation need the attention and efforts of those in charge of schools, education departments and even the government to solve. In response to these problems, this paper makes some suggestions for improvement. It argues that the key to solving these problems lies firstly in clarifying the objectives of cooperation and ensuring that the cooperating schools work towards a common goal. It is also necessary for strong schools to cooperate with other schools with an open mind, abandon over-protection of resources, and establish an equal and mutually beneficial cooperative relationship. Weak schools should face up to the gaps and tap their own advantageous resources to boost their confidence, while establishing equal partnerships with strong schools. With the joint promotion of both sides, inter-school cooperation between primary and secondary schools in China will usher in better development opportunities and a broader space for development.

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