



Constructing resource sharing collaboration for quality public education in urban China: Case study of school alliance in Beijing



Jing Liu

R306, Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya, 464-8601, Japan

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the ongoing policy initiative of establishing networks of school-to-school collaboration for resource sharing in order to improve the quality of public education in urban China. Through discourse analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews with school administrators and teachers in Beijing, this study interprets the nature, achievements, and relevant factors shaping school collaboration. The research findings demonstrate that resource sharing between collaborating schools provides students with a better learning environment, enables teachers and school administrators to share resources and experiences, and allows the strengthening of mutual understanding about teaching and school management. This article concludes by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the collaboration from the perspectives of constructivism and social capital theory, and highlights comprehensive efforts are further necessary to widen the policy context in order to help redress the mismatch between this policy reform, the current education system, and social and cultural norms.

1. Introduction

In 2016 the global community affirmed free, equitable and quality public education for all as the primary target for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Since the 1990s, many countries have been making efforts to improve disadvantaged schools in order to provide equal and quality education for all. Policies and practices such as avoiding early student selection and controlling school choice became popular approaches in many OECD countries to avoid school segregation and to balance the allocation of students with diverse capabilities to study together in public schools. Most developed countries, as well as developing countries, have been taking action to empower school leaders, stimulate a supportive school climate and learning environment, and to strengthen teacher training and promote a network of cooperation among schools, parents, and communities (OECD, 2012). In England, the government invested special funds and launched several programs, such as the Specialist Schools Program, the Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones programs. These programs sought to raise the educational standards of disadvantaged public schools, improve the performance of disadvantaged students, and encourage partnership and cooperation between schools and local communities (Harris and Chapman, 2004). With the launch of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, the US government required each state to establish Adequate Yearly Progress targets for each school district and school to meet to raise student achievement and increase accountability in public schools. The federal and

state governments provide financial and technical support for the public schools which cannot meet their goals by holding professional development training, strengthening school governance, and providing school transfer options to parents in disadvantaged schools (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). In the 1990s, Australia established the Australian National Schools Network to promote school reform and school improvement by forming partnerships and networks among schools, teachers and other stakeholders (Sachs and Smith, 1999). In Japan, Nagaoka City adopted school collaboration within the same school district for accommodating students' interests in sports activities, arts, music and foreign languages (Onishi, 1998). Hong Kong adopted the Program of Improving the Quality of Education For All to improve school improvement practices through school collaboration and partnership (West and Ainscow, 2010).

Among the practices mentioned above, school-to-school collaboration for school improvement has been receiving increasing interest in many countries. It is an approach for providing complementary resources, knowledge, skills among members, and training within the collaborative framework to achieve school improvement. School collaboration between high- and lower-performing schools has a positive impact on student outcomes, teacher motivation, school leadership, school management and parental involvement. Also, it promotes school improvement, broadens opportunities and enhances resource sharing (Ainscow et al., 2006; CUREE, 2005; Hadfield and Jopling, 2006; Muijs, 2015; Muijs et al., 2010). However, existing studies reveal several

E-mail address: liujing@gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp.

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challenges to this approach. Researchers argue that this reform has influenced school autonomy, hindered the power balance between schools, caused difficulties in constructing shared educational goals, and demonstrated the limitations of top-down reform (Aiston et al., 2002; Armstrong, 2015; Chapman et al., 2009; Hayes and Lynch, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2007; Muijs et al., 2011).

Researchers explored the theoretical basis for collaboration or networking in education. Muijs et al. (2011) recognized the theoretical base in the field of sociology, psychology, and business studies. Nevertheless, they categorized four theoretical perspectives which are supporting interactive collaboration and networking. These include constructivist organizational theory, social capital theory, New Social Movement theory, and Durkheimian network theory. Here, I highlight the perspectives of constructivist organizational theory and social capital theory, as I assumed they could best meet the purpose of this study. According to constructivist theory, collaboration provides a platform for stakeholders to construct a shared understanding and interpretation of reality. It gives stakeholders an opportunity to have a complementary understanding of the world from each other. On the other hand, this theory emphasizes that there must be sufficient cognitive differences to build a new knowledge of the reality among stakeholders in the collaboration. It also states that the differences should be similar enough for the collaboration to be possible and constructive. Furthermore, constructivists emphasize the role of contextual factors, such as relationships, history, and power in constructing a network or collaboration (Muijs et al., 2011, 2010). From the perspective of social capital theory, networking or collaboration has value in creating more resources to be available for the stakeholders involved. This shows that collaboration has value in spanning “structural holes” by providing knowledge, resource, skills or information which are not available to some of the actors involved in the collaboration (Burt, 1992; Muijs et al., 2011, 2010). However, a network can be a failure or cannot get the expected result if there is a significant imbalance between actors regarding resources and the social status they have (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Muijs et al., 2010). Moreover, the inequality of social capital emerges once one actor or a group of actors within the collaboration are in a disadvantaged status (Lin, 2000).

Although there has been remarkable progress in achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals in the past decades, China is still facing challenges in ensuring quality public education with equity and balance for all (The World Bank, 2012; UNESCO, 2012). Studies show that imbalances between eastern and western regions, urban and rural areas, and schools within the same areas or the same school district caused the inequalities in public education development (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013; Liu, 2013; Mok et al., 2009; Parkhouse and Rong, 2016; Zeng et al., 2007). Since 2000, governments at different levels have developed policies with the aim of balancing the development of public education and to reduce or eliminate the difference between public school quality, in order to provide sound public education for all. These policies emphasize the standardization of school construction for public primary and lower secondary schools, the reconstruction of disadvantaged schools, and the sharing of quality education resources among public schools within the same area (Liu, 2016; Wang, 2015). As mainstream practice in urban areas, local governments normally initiated school district management and school-to-school collaboration to redress the difference between schools in the same area and expand service scale of quality education resources to local residents. These approaches include the school consortium system,¹ school alliance, and the rotation of teachers or school leaders between public schools (Central Committee of the

Communist Party of China, 2013; Deng and Zhao, 2014; Liu, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2014).

There is an increasing number of publications by Chinese scholars giving detailed analyses at the policy level of the ongoing reform for building equitable and quality public education, as well as a theoretical analysis of the reform. Notwithstanding, the extant literature provides a less-than-comprehensive analysis and explanation of this policy adaptation and its practice amongst stakeholders at the district and school levels. This study explores the policy adaptation process at the district level and interprets stakeholders' interaction in the process of constructing education resource sharing collaboration among public junior high schools in the same school district. The following sections introduce the development of the key school system, which shaped the imbalance among public schools in the urban areas of China. Furthermore, it reviews policy integration for building quality public education in urban China. The subsequent section then presents the findings by explaining how district governments have adopted the policy to practice at the school level, through summarizing relevant policies and analyzing a case study of school alliance reform in Beijing. The paper concludes by applying a theoretical discussion on school collaboration from the perspectives of constructivist and social capital theory and highlights the necessary and comprehensive efforts for constructing a wider policy context which can redress the mismatch between this reform policy, the current education system, and social norms.

2. Background

2.1. Imbalanced development of public schools

A review of the literature on the imbalanced development of public schools indicates that the key school system and its transformation caused the contemporary imbalanced development between public schools in China. This includes imbalances in the distribution of financial resources, assignment of quality teachers, and enrollment of better-performing students. Moreover, it has led to intensified competition among public schools and made public school segregation worsen.

The development of the key school system had three stages. The first stage was from 1953 to the start of the Cultural Revolution. The initial reason for establishing key schools was to foster necessary human resources for socialist construction in the limited number of high-quality public schools in the 1950s. Moreover, these schools were expected to share their accumulated experiences with other schools. In general, there were a limited number of public schools designated as key schools. In addition, only a small number of students were able to enter such schools. The 2nd National Education Conference held in 1953 selected 194 junior high schools across the country as key high schools, which was 4.4% of the total number of high schools. This number increased to 487 in 1963 (Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1984). Although the key school system was abolished during the Cultural Revolution,² in the second stage, the system was reintroduced and strengthened in the era of post-Cultural Revolution with the rise of the elite education ideology for economic reform in the late 1970s (Lewin and Hui, 1989; Rosen, 1983). By 1981 there were 4016 key public junior high schools nationwide, which was 3.8% of the total number of key schools (Ke et al., 2013, p. 66; Kusuyama, 2009, p. 164). In 1988, approximately 2.6% of all entrants in lower secondary schools attended

² During the Cultural Revolution, the key schools were called “little treasure house pagoda schools” by the Red Guards. The key schools were declared to cultivate the sons and grandsons of dragons: “They put intellectual cultivation in the first place and results of examinations in command. They fanatically pursue a high rate of promotion into higher schools”. Students of the 1 August Boarding School for the children of leading cadres appealed to Red Guard units to release them from the prison which was turning them into ‘revisionist saplings’. Once their school had served the revolutionary cause by housing the children of cadres working in the white areas; now it was a privileged institution, a Shangri-la for the children of powerful party personnel. School authorities had followed the road of British and Soviet aristocratic boarding establishments and never admitted the children of workers or peasants (Cleverley, 1985, p. 169).

¹ There are different types of school consortium systems. First, the government builds a new school and authorizes the school management at a well-performing public school. Second, a well-performing public school and a private school merge into one school. Third, a well-performing public school works with a private company to establish and manage a new school together. Fourth, a well-performing public school in an urban area works closely with a public school in a rural area. Last, a Chinese school and a foreign school collaborate and jointly manage two schools together (Fang, 2011, p. 154).

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