

An Empirical Study of Basic Education Grouping to Promote Equity in Urban and Rural Education --A Case Study of Northwest China

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Abstract: The rapid development of urbanisation in China has led to the inequitable and uneven development of education between urban and rural areas. As the innovative model of basic education grouping continues to progress, the scope of its radiation has gradually extended from cities to the neighbouring villages and towns. Therefore, this study raises the question of whether the grouping of basic education could effectively promote equity in urban and rural education. The author clarifies the concepts of educational equity and basic education grouping, and chooses the northwest region as the research site to carry out the empirical research. Through quantitative analysis of the questionnaires and interviews, this study draws relevant conclusions about the advantages and shortcomings of basic education grouping. Finally, this study compares the practices of western education grouping, and tries to form the improvement path of basic education grouping in China.

Keywords: Basic education grouping; Educational equity; Northwest China; Urban-rural education inequality

1. Concept definition

1.1 Educational equity

According to the theories of Chinese educationalists, the disadvantaged groups should increase the allocation of public educational resources^[1]. And the equality of opportunity in education should include equality in the starting point of education on the one hand, and equality in the process of education on the other hand, which is ultimately equal in terms of access to educational resources^[2].

And in western theories, equity in education consists of: equity in the starting point, equity in the process and equity in the outcome^[3]. According to the two-principle theory of equity, equity in educational outcomes should be promoted through compensatory education^[4].

Therefore, the author defines educational equity as: achieving equity in the starting point, process and outcome of education, as well as ensuring that educational resources are reasonably inclined towards the disadvantaged groups on the premise of pursuing the relative unity of educational equity and efficiency.

1.2 Basic education grouping

For this study, basic education grouping refers to an education group with basic education as its main business object. With a certain common purpose as the will and driving force, a famous school or some high-quality schools as the core school, a number of schools of the same type with differences in development join to form a school community with brand sharing, complementary advantages and scale effects.

2. A case study based on the grouping of basic education in Northwest China

2.1 Background of basic education grouping in Northwest China

According to the latest statistics released by the Chinese government report in 2022, the northwest region, which has the largest number of rural areas and the most unbalanced urban-rural development, has the most serious urban-rural education inequality, which promotes the development of education groups in the region. The typical characteristics of the region also make the study of basic

education grouping in this work more representative and credible.

2.2 Models of basic education grouping in the Northwest China

After three decades of development since the 1990s, three representative models of basic education grouping have been formed: delegated management, grouping of prestigious schools and district-based schooling. Xi'an City, as the most representative city in the northwest region, was chosen as the area of empirical research. For the empirical study, three schools subject to the same school grouping were selected.

Case / Group	Group schooling model	Description of the school model	Reach / Group Managed Schools	Accepting students Source	Specific measures
Xi'an Aerospace City No.4 Primary School	Delegated Management	The government purchases professional services from schools or social professional bodies to achieve cross-regional mobility of educational resources	Fuyan Primary School	Students from counties around Xi'an (eg. Yanliang County, Fuping County)	Flat management, non-interference in the daily management of schools, de-administration; comprehensive sharing of textbook research resources to promote the quality of local education; regular exchange of teachers to promote the renewal of teaching methods
	Grouping of Prestigious Schools	A community of schools formed by a unified philosophy and charter with a core of prestigious schools to share educational resources	New Farm Primary School	Students from remote developing areas (counties/villages around Xi'an City)	Diversified development under the concept of "prestigious schools+" co-operative schooling; promoting the sharing of teaching resources and using "prestigious schools" to promote "+ schools"; basically the same school system structure
	District-based schooling	Rationalising the composition of basic education schools in the region into school districts for integrated management	Xi'an Aerospace City No.6 Primary School	All students within the zoning district	The dominant school is fully responsible for all affairs of the managed school, with a fully aligned philosophy and administration, presided over by the same team of teachers for collaborative development; flexible mobility of teachers and shared resources between the two schools.

2.3 Statistic analysis of the significance of basic education grouping

After researching the local basic education grouping model, this study administered questionnaires to 10 students from each of the 4 schools from the neighbouring villages and 20 teachers who were involved in the mobile teaching model. The questionnaires for the students focused on their learning outcomes, while the questionnaires for the teachers were about their evaluation for grouping management.

The quantitative statistics tables of a total of 60 questionnaires are as followed.

Content % (40 copies) (for students)	Very good (5)	Better (4)	General (3)	Poor (2)	Very poor (1)
Is school co-op effective in increasing your learning enthusiasm?	50 (25%)	48 (30%)	27 (22.5%)	14 (17.5%)	2 (5%)
Whether the school co-op has enriched your learning resources (e.g. courseware, teaching aids, etc.)	70 (35%)	60 (37.5%)	21 (17.5%)	4 (5%)	2 (5%)

Content % (20 copies) (for teachers)	Very good (5)	Better (4)	General (3)	Poor (2)	Very poor (1)
Do you think the difference in teaching and management between urban and rural areas has been reduced through long-term dual teacher exchanges?	30 (30%)	32 (40%)	15 (25%)	2 (5%)	0 (0)
Whether the gap between the core school and the branch school students' education opportunities has been narrowed?	25 (25%)	24 (30%)	12 (20%)	6 (15%)	2 (10%)

The above tables show that both the students and the faculties have a positive attitude towards the grouping of basic education, that it has effectively reduced the differences between branch schools and core schools.

2.4 Interviews on the strengths and weaknesses of basic education grouping

In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the potential of basic education grouping, detailed interviews were conducted with teachers involved in co-teaching and parents of students, focusing on the specific effect of how grouping has helped their children improve their quality of learning, and the problems that still exist in internal grouping, and so on.

The analysis of the interviews leads to the following conclusions.

Advantages:

(1) For children in remote areas: have access to the latest quality teaching resources from the city's top schools; significantly improve the progression rate and average grades of children in mountainous areas.

(2) For the branch schools: a joint venture with a prestigious school can give full play to the brand effect, thus increasing the enrolment and popularity of the branch school; the teachers of the branch school can fully learn from the advanced teaching methods of the core school, thus narrowing the gap.

Weaknesses:

(1) Imperfect institutional construction for group schooling: the objective gap between core schools and branch schools has led to the inability to fully implement the management system and methods of core schools in rural branch schools, resulting in the failure of localisation.

(2) New monopolies in education: joint schools are unable to cover all poor children in mountainous areas, resulting in a new "rural-rural" education gap and new educational monopolies between joint branches and independent village schools.

3. An improved path for basic education grouping to promote equity in urban and rural education

3.1 Practice of western education grouping

In the 1980s, American educator Theodore Sizer conducted experiments with "elemental school alliances" to improve basic education through the formation of a number of loose school alliances.

The UK's education grouping is regulated by the government and protected by law: in 2009, the UK government formally identified 'joint schooling' as an important initiative for basic education. Another point worth mentioning is that the UK government has chosen to arrange for professional assessment agencies to evaluate primary schools and close down some of the poor quality schools, so as to encourage schools to co-operate with elite schools, thereby improving the overall standard of the education system.

3.2 The paths to improvement of basic education grouping in China

Combining the requirements of educational equity, as well as the shortcomings of education grouping practices derived from empirical research, this study has come up with the following paths for improvement.

(1) Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) lacks a clear legal policy on the joint operation of schools. MOE should improve the relevant legal policies, promote the establishment of joint schools through measures such as compulsory association and clarification of accountability.

(2) MOE lacks a clear evaluation system for the operation of "old and dilapidated" schools, which has resulted in the inability to fully promote educational integration. Therefore, MOE should work with the relevant authorities to review the qualifications of schools in mountainous areas so as to maximise the connection between schools in mountainous areas and urban schools.

(3) Local governments should reach a consensus with urban schools to invest more educational resources and attract more elite teacher resources to rural schools through financial support, incentive setting, liability restraint.

4. Conclusion

Through quantitative statistics and analysis of the results, the following conclusions were drawn: basic education grouping does have a significant effect in promoting equity in urban and rural education, but it still faces problems such as imperfect relevant systems and low teacher mobility. Accordingly, this study draws on the practical experience of "joint schools" in Western countries to form paths for improving the grouping of basic education in China: improve the relevant legal system, establish a qualification assessment mechanism and increase local government investment. Through these improvement paths, the changes in the basic education grouping in China will play a significant role in the equity of urban and rural education.

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