

Nicholas Sun-Keung Pang & Vera Meng-meng Yan

Chasing a Balance between Equity and Quality: The New High-Quality Schools Project in Shanghai, China

Abstract

After PISA 2009, Shanghai education has received unprecedented attention from home and abroad. The government in Shanghai summed up the successful experience and launched the New High-Quality Schools (NHQS) project as a response. Under the policy background of promoting high-quality and equitable compulsory education in China, the NHQS project undertook the unique task of creating high-quality educational resources. The project is not only an honorary certification for the project schools, but also an organized small-scale school improvement plan. Compared with the National Blue-Ribbon Schools (NBRS) program in the United States, both projects encourage schools to create high-quality education from a bottom-up approach and provide a platform for excellent schools to share experiences. The distinctive features in the NHQS project are that it emphasizes the indispensable importance of quality with equity, and is more guided by the government. The “Green Indicators” used in the NHQS project go beyond a single criterion of student achievement in the past. However, as the overall assessment system in China has not changed, such small-scale attempts are still facing many difficulties.

Keywords: school improvement, education policy, education reform, equity, quality, Shanghai education, China

Introduction

In 2009, Shanghai participated in the PISA test and ranked first in the world, arousing global attention to education in Shanghai. Although such large-scale assessments (LSA) have been questioned (Yuan & Zhao, 2019), the results can be a valuable resource for studying trends and evolving systems in education (Johansson, 2016). Some scholars turned their perspectives to the government’s response to PISA. Tan (2019) examined how Chinese education officials interpreted and utilized selective information from PISA to legitimate the initiatives in Shanghai. One of the initiatives was the New High-Quality School project (NHQS project), which was launched by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (SMEC) in 2011. The rationale behind the NHQS project was more than a response to PISA. What we can learn from the NHQS project is the strategy of education reform adopted by Shanghai, that is, the pursuit of a balance between quality and equity of education.

To better understand the NHQS project, reference to the experience and practice in other contexts is necessary. In the United States, where the education system is relatively mature, a similar project called the National Blue-Ribbon Schools program (NBRS program) was proposed by the United States Department of Education in 1982. Both projects were not the mainstream policies of the governments, but rather an exploration and encouragement of high-quality education. Therefore, we attempt to compare characteristics of the two projects, in

order to better understand what Shanghai has done in the pursuit of a balanced education of equity and quality. Our main research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the new high-quality schools in Shanghai?
- (2) How does the NHQS project drive to school improvement in a balance between quality and equity?

The background of the NHQS project in Shanghai

With the development of China's economy, society and education popularization, the expectation of education has changed from enlarging educational opportunities to achieving quality education. In 2019, the Chinese central government officially issued a long-term educational development plan entitled, *China's education modernization 2035* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). As the achievement of high-quality and equitable compulsory education is one of the development goals in this plan, all provinces and municipalities have been reforming their education sub-systems responding to such a call.

The NHQS project in Shanghai is an exemplified school improvement endeavor. Yin (2012), the Deputy Director of the SMEC at that time, pointed out that the PISA 2009 results showed that some ordinary schools had been transformed successfully into quality schools, without additional resources from the central government. These schools had created profound cultural heritage that lifted the standard of basic education in Shanghai. Therefore, the SMEC launched the NHQS project in 2011 to study the growth trajectory of these successful public schools. The aims of this project were to examine the mechanism of how these ordinary schools had turned around into high-quality schools and to promote the successful experience of school reform. Another rationale behind this project was to explore how the government could achieve equity in education, in addition to the pursuit of quality in compulsory education.

As Shanghai is open to globalization, the traditional Confucian ethics and values of collectivism, trust, and honesty in education have been competing with those so-called new values of market, choice, competition, efficiency, and accountability (Pang & Wang, 2017). The NHQS project was a test of the policy that aimed at cooling down the "choice fever" (schools competing for quality students and students competing for quality schools) in urban areas. Therefore, in the certification for new high-quality schools in Shanghai, both equity and quality became both important criteria in assessment.

In 2011, 43 primary and secondary schools in Shanghai were selected and nominated as project schools. In order to radiate quality educational resources and experiences through cluster innovation, the SMEC launched the *Three-year Action Plan for New High-quality School Cluster Development in Shanghai (2015-2017)* in 2015. The plan aimed at that, by 2017, the number of schools in the new high-quality school clusters would be expanded to about 250, covering about 25% of the public schools in Shanghai (SMEC, 2015). From 2015 to 2020, the SMEC issued other policies that reinforced at achieving a balance between quality and equity of education in Shanghai (SMEC, 2020). The main strategy in the reform is to enhance cluster development among schools, in which almost every school in Shanghai is put into a group. Through school grouping, educational resources can be shared from

high-quality schools to weak schools. Different from the way of resource input and investment in the past, schools in the NHQS project were expected to deploy resources sustainably. That is, the NHQS project has its uniqueness and importance in testing the strategy of how to create quality education as the premise of equity. Therefore, it is significant to study the policy in such reform and to identify what render new high-quality schools in Shanghai.

Research methods

Our research team visited four NHQS schools, including two primary schools and two middle schools. The participants of the study were the principals and teachers in the NHQS project. Qualitative data were collected by face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the principal and 4-6 teachers in group within each school. Most interviews lasted around one hour and were conducted in offices or meeting rooms in the project schools. The interviews aimed at exploring their strategies of school improvement and their personal views of the NHQS project. We asked about the schools' history, improvement processes, successful factors, and visions of education in Shanghai. For the National Blue-Ribbon Schools (NBRBS) in the USA, we analyzed the submitted statements in their application materials in competing for the award of NBRBS.

Framework for analysis

Based on an analysis of theories and case studies in the field of school improvement, Reezigt and Creemers (2005) proposed a comprehensive framework for effective school improvement. It shows that the concept of an improving school is firmly embedded in the educational context of a country and effective improvement requires school-level processes. Drawing on this framework, we analyzed the available data in the following four aspects: (a) context, (b) improvement culture, (c) improvement processes, and (d) improvement outcomes.

Context

In China at present, equity is highly emphasized and the government has great power to achieve the intended goals. School choice is limited by *hukou* (residence in a school district) and the “choice fever” is considered as a problem that threatens education equity. In 2020, the policy of the *Synchronous Enrollment of Public Schools and Private Schools* (*gong min tong zhao*) has been fully implemented, that intended to weaken the competitiveness of private schools for more able students. In the education reform in Shanghai, the district education bureaus were urged to enforce the policy of school enrollment which allowed schools to admit children only from their own communities. Principals and teachers were reminded that quality education are not the results of competing with other schools in enrolling more able students, but that schools should emphasize education for all and schools should hold ultimate responsibility for the families in the community. As Principal Zhang said,

*We want to turn a school that in their eyes is not good enough into a quality school.
We always seek to provide students from the average families with a curriculum that*

would enhance their effective learning experience and that would cater for their individual growth.

In this context of the reform policy, cooperation among schools is encouraged, while excessive competition among schools is not promoted. The SMEC set up new high-quality school clusters, with one NHQS project school shared their successful experiences with around 10 other ordinary schools within a cluster, and led them to develop concurrently with a variety of activities around different themes of school change.

In this way, each school can learn from the NHQS project school for new ideas and all other schools can develop on their own, without having attended to centralized directives from the SMEC. (Principal Fan)

In America, there are different types of schools that suit the needs of families from different backgrounds. Freedom of school choice for parents has created strong competition among schools. To render schools more adaptable to the needs of families, the government has given schools more autonomy and strengthened accountability for them (Elwick, 2017). Principals have owned much autonomy in curriculum, personnel, and finance while under immense pressure to improve the school's ranking in the district. The vitality of schools is stimulated, but at the same time, school choice brings about the consequences of stratification of schools and mostly benefits those advantaged families (Ben-Porath, 2021).

Improvement culture

In general and everywhere, school changes are initiated by governments rather than schools themselves (Rosenblatt, 2004). However, schools or teachers can take improvement initiatives spontaneously. In both the NHQS project and the NBRIS program, the school leaders and teacher groups had strong internal motivation to improve the quality of school education. Putting aside ideas such as competition, their belief was to offer children the best education. This belief allowed them to continuously improve their teaching or management and strive for excellence.

The leadership of the principal does matter for building an improvement culture.

As a principal, first I have to figure out what kind of school I want to run. Then I would find out what I am lacking and request the Education Bureau for extra funding or personnel support. That is, to know what I want to do is important. (Principal Zhang)

With a strong desire to improve, principals in the NHQS schools took actions spontaneously to gain extra resources for school improvement, which supported teachers' willingness and attitudes to change.

The headmaster always emphasizes professionalism and strives for excellence. Once she has found a direction for school reform, she spares no effort to invest in all kinds of resources. She has high expectation and demands on the teachers, as well as, offers support and encouragement. (Teacher Tang)

As the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) illustrates, appropriate resources can increase people's motivation and potentials, especially when the job is demanding.

Nowadays, parents are more educated and children are now seeing things differently than ever before. The internet has provided a wealth of information resources for all, making online learning and lifelong learning a reality. So that, the

school culture should be kept abreast with the new expectations from students and parents. In the words of Teacher Lu,

Because of the changes of the times, for teachers, the 'passing line' of being a good teacher or providing a good education has changed.

Improvement process

In addition to internal efforts, the nominated schools in the NHQS project can receive guidance and support from the Shanghai Research Centre for New High-Quality Schools and from district bureaus. They provided the principals and teachers of the project schools with sufficient opportunities and channels for professional development, training, exchanges and exhibitions (SMEC, 2015). Meanwhile, professional learning communities are created within schools, among schools, and between practitioners and researchers. The principals of the four NHQS, we visited, claimed that, they now have a New High-Quality Schools Alliance. Schools are no longer alone in their educational reforms or work behind closed doors. Further external forces of change also exist at the school level, such as, schools can invite external experts to support school improvement and guidance in change. The reform finally happens at the team level and the subject group level as well. When a school in the NHQS project has succeeded in certain endeavors, they will share their experiences to other schools within the group and disseminate the successful practices to other groups of NHQS schools too. Therefore, the NHQS project is not only a tool of certification, but also a planned improvement project under the guidance of the government in Shanghai.

As to the NBRIS program in the United States, it identifies several hundred outstanding schools annually and celebrates their school excellence, turn-around stories, and how they have worked to close achievement gaps. The NBRIS Award is both a high aspiration and a potent resource of practitioner knowledge. These schools serve as examples of successful continuous improvement for other schools throughout the nation. Their successful achievements are also posted on the U.S. Department of Education's website and shared to the public (United States Department of Education, 2021). The main characteristics of the NBRIS program is that school change is from within and there is no external intervention. The NBRIS program is more of an award encouragement and experience promotion.

Improvement outcomes

Reezigt and Creemers (2005) divided improvement goals into two types: goals that are explicitly written in terms of student outcomes and goals that are focused on change. *Green Indicators* for the primary and secondary students in Shanghai are used as the evaluation criteria for nomination to the NHQS project, which include 10 aspects: (i) students' academic level, (ii) learning motivation, (iii) academic burden, (iv) teacher-student relationship, (v) instruction methods, (vi) the principal's curriculum leadership, (vii) students' socioeconomic status, (viii) students' moral conduct and behavior, (ix) students' physical and mental health, and (x) student progress across multiple years (SMEC, 2011). It is apparent that student's academic achievement is not the single indicator for main consideration. This project emphasizes a holistic development of students and pays more attention to education equity. In the eyes of the Shanghai principals and teachers,

schools have never been examination factories. (Teacher Zhang)

Shanghai is an open-minded city in the sense that academic scores are important, but not the only indicator for student performance. Other areas of development, like art, technology, and sports are also very important and never neglected. (Teacher Huang)

Most principals and teachers in the NHQS project value the practical changes brought about by the reforms, which include the transformation of the classroom climate and the development of teachers' professional competencies.

In contrast to the NHQS project, the NBRIS program has set two categories of awards: Exemplary High Performing Award and Exemplary Achievement Gap-Closing Award. Exemplary High Performing Award are for those schools that have the state's highest high-school graduation rates and the highest achieving students (the top 15%) in English and Mathematics, while Exemplary Achievement Gap-Closing Award are for those schools that have made the greatest advancement (top 15%) in closing gaps in subgroup achievement in English and Mathematics over the past three to five years. Both are measured by state assessments or nationally normed tests (United States Department of Education, 2021). It shows that the main criterion for evaluation for the awards is the absolute achievements of students or the degree of narrowing of the gap between students' achievements in the United States.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at reviewing the NHQS project which was launched after Shanghai had been ranked first in PISA 2009 and exploring how Shanghai education has attended to a balance between equity and quality in school education. Through an analysis of the policies issued by the SMEC in Shanghai, we found the NHQS project have focused more on the creation of network resources rather than deploying of existing resources. Further, the government in Shanghai has worked with the project schools to define the meanings of high-quality schools. In the past, high-quality schools were always regarded as the key schools which had high reputations, rich resources, and high enrollment rates of more able students. Nowadays, the new high-quality schools are no longer the key schools or selective schools. Any school that can perform well under the standards of the *Green Indicators* and can satisfy students' and parents' needs will be nominated as NHQS. This project advocates a balance of quality and equity as its advocacy in the new era.

We compared the NHQS project in Shanghai with the NBRIS program in the United States, using a comprehensive framework for effective school improvement. We visited four NHQS project schools in Shanghai for field work and data collection about the principals' and teachers' views of the NHQS project and their experience of how to attend to a balance between quality and equity in school education. We found that the culture of cooperation and mutual assistance among NHQS schools is strong, especially through cluster development. To chase a balance between equity and quality, the strategy taken by the government in Shanghai is to turn around the quality of weak schools, so that every student can receive good education. From the field work in these schools, we can see that principals and teachers in Shanghai have inherent and strong motivations for improvement. They recognize and espouse the philosophy of education advocated by the Shanghai

Municipal Education Commission, which emphasizes the importance on the holistic development of all children.

In sum, Shanghai's NHQS project has involved more participation and guidance from the central government and is a new attempt to explore school improvement. Although the use of green indicators in assessing school performance goes beyond the previous use of student academic score as a single indicator, the project may still encounter some difficulties in reality. For example, competition among students and among schools never ends. Therefore, the philosophy in balancing between education quality and equity requires a wider propaganda and needs to gain all stakeholders' understanding and recognition. Although the NHQS project is experimental in Shanghai and not in a big scale, its influence on school reform in China is evident. There have been local governments in some other provinces and cities in China that have learnt from Shanghai's experience and set up their own NHQS projects.

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Prof. Dr. Nicholas Sun-Keung Pang, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

Ms. Vera Meng-meng Yan, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China