

Analysis on the Equity Between Private Schools and Public Schools in China: An Equity-Focused Educator Interview

Xinnuo Chen^{1,a,*}

¹*Nanjing University of Art, Nanjing, 210013, China*

a. 741154937@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In recent years, the emergence of private schools in China has caused a series of problems related to educational equity. Against this background, the author had an interview with Principal Chen, a famous educator in Ganzhou, Jiangxi, China. He is one of a few principals in Ganzhou who have both teaching and management experience. The interview aims to find what the biggest educational problem is in Principal Chen's educational career. In conclusion, this paper holds that the Chinese government should supervise and standardize the reward and punishment rather than deprive the school of its reward and punishment rights. At the same time, the government should raise the salary of teachers in the basic education stage and guarantee that their salaries are not lower than the income level of local civil servants, thereby making teachers get rid of the pressure of survival and devote themselves better to education. Finally, this paper emphasizes the important role of leadership in promoting educational equity.

Keywords: Educational Equity, Leadership, Institutional Logic, Private Schools

1. Introduction

Nowadays, with high salaries, private schools in China attract outstanding teachers and students from public schools, which widens the education gap. At the same time, a government policy issued recently has restricted the high-scoring rewards in public schools, which has further aggravated the negative impact and greatly reduced the teaching enthusiasm of teachers in public schools. At present, there is little research emphasizing the influence of private schools on public schools in China. However, the influence of the emergence and growth of private schools on the education industry can not be ignored. Therefore, the author conducts an interview with Principal Chen, intending to give a perspective from front-line practitioners and analyze in detail how private schools in China affect the running of public schools and even the educational system. In this paper, the author introduces the work experience of the interviewee, Principal Chen, who is a leader with 30 years of work experience in the education industry. Besides, the question design of the interview is listed and the findings obtained from the interview are analyzed. Additionally, a new local schooling phenomenon, the job switching of good teachers, and a new-issued regulation are introduced in detail. Finally, the author gives some thoughts and suggestions. This paper is instructive for the Chinese government to promote healthy competition between private schools and public schools in China and safeguard educational equity.

2. Literature Review

Based on the research of Ishimaru and Galloway in 2021, alternative theories that promote equity-focused organizational change can hold promise for promoting educational justice. In other words, there is a need to commit to initiatives that enhance systemic change, especially organizational change [1].

Based on Rawls' principle of justice, Jin Jiuren analyzes the possibility of the government's responsibility to promote educational fairness from the perspectives of educational fairness plasticity, government ability, and responsible government. In terms of the nature of government, the nature of education, and the causal relationship between the government and educational equity, the inevitability of the government's responsibility to promote educational equity is studied [2].

Educational equity is the extension of social equity in the field of education, and it is very important to solve the problem of educational equity to promote the democratization and popularization of education in China and promote social harmony and progress. Zhang Lulu analyzes the present situation of education equity in primary and secondary schools in Xi'an. In the paper, from the basic connotation of education equity, Zhang probes into the outstanding problems such as unreasonable school distribution, an insufficient supply of educational resources, a shortage of supporting resources, and a monopoly of "prestigious schools", and Zhang puts forward the implementation ways to improve education equity [3].

3. Method

3.1. Introduction of the Interviewee

The author was honored to interview Principal Zhigang Chen, the principal of a public provincial high school in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. The school he works at is one of the best in the area. Principal Chen is an educator with a wealth of teaching and leadership experience. He graduated from the Chinese Department of Jiangxi Normal University in 1994. He then worked as a language teacher in high school and started to work as a vice principal of an ordinary high school in 1998. In 2003, Principal Chen was transferred to a provincial key high school as a vice principal because of his outstanding performance and the significant increase in the students' advancement rate. In 2015, after years of leadership on the front lines of education, Principal Chen became the youngest-ever principal of a local provincial key high school and has continued to be responsible for both teaching and learning, achieving notable academic honors in the field of teaching and learning. So far, Principal Chen has been in the field of education for 30 years.

3.2. Interview Question Design

The author had a 30-minute in-depth conversation with Principal Chen. The author made sufficient preparations for researching the local education situation and then asked Principal Chen some questions about education equity. The designed questions are as follows:

1. Please talk about your background as an educator.
2. As an educator, how do you define education equity in general?
3. What strikes you among the educational equity issues you have encountered?
4. What do you think is the complexity of this issue?
5. How did you solve it, or how do you hope to solve it?
6. Please describe your leadership style.
7. Have you had experience using your own leadership style to successfully address an educational equity issue?

4. Findings

4.1. A New Local Schooling Phenomenon

When the author asked Principal Chen what was the biggest challenge he had encountered in his time as principal with regard to educational equity, he said that the recent emergence of a local community had been the biggest challenge to overcome in recent years. According to Principal Chen, it was a new local schooling phenomenon that has emerged in recent years. In 2015, a new private school (Houde School) was opened in the area. This school is also known as the rich man's school. Because of the financial support from investors, it is committed to becoming a school with the best teaching environment, the best teachers, and the best students. What comes with this is that its tuition fee is extremely high if the students attending do not score more than 800 points in the senior high school entrance examination. According to “the Notice of Public Comment on the Adjustment of Tuition Rates for Our Fall 2023 Freshman Class”, the tuition fee for new high school students during the 2021-2023 school year is 10,500 RMB per semester [4].

4.2. Job Switching of Good Teachers

The investors of the school have adopted the model of recruiting good teachers and high-achieving students with heavy fees, poaching many good teachers from several public schools. Houde School offers them a salary of 350,000 RMB a year, not including the rest of the extra incentives if any of their students are admitted to Tsinghua or Peking University. Compared to public schools where the highest-ranking teacher earns only 200,000 RMB a year, Houde School's salary is very hard for teachers to refuse. As a result, according to Principal Chen, five out of six teachers in his school's best-graded classes have jumped ship. At the same time, Houde School also offers very attractive conditions to students with high scores in the midterm exams: not only are three years of tuition and living expenses waived, but they are also given a bonus of 100,000 RMB per person if they go to the school. As a result, the student population of public schools has been greatly affected, and the possibility of continuing to maintain a superior university entrance rate has been greatly reduced.

4.3. A New-Issued Regulation

Based on the information given by Principal Chen, the author followed up by asking whether this would subsequently lead to a significant increase in the pressure on public school teachers. Principal Chen said that on the contrary, the teacher's desire to compete has almost disappeared, which is related to a new regulation issued by the state in recent years.

The Ministry of Education issued “the Notice on Doing a Good Job of Enrolling Students in General Colleges and Universities in 2021”, which mentioned that it is strictly forbidden for local governments, schools, and training institutes to use the results of the college entrance examination as a criterion for rewarding teachers and students [5]. Previously, if a public school achieved good results in this year's college entrance examination, the school could give the teacher a corresponding performance bonus. However, after the introduction of this provision, a teacher cannot receive additional rewards even if she/he exceeds the target number of Tsinghua and Peking University. In contrast, private schools are subject to much fewer constraints, and they have adopted a market mechanism similar to the heavy rewards and penalties, which has greatly increased the motivation of teachers. In addition, teachers in public schools do not have to worry about deductions from their pay if they do not meet their goals with poor teaching results, but private schools sign short-term contracts with their teachers, and they can even be fired under the contract if they do not meet their goals. With both the quality of students and the reward system changing, many teachers in public schools are no longer motivated to work because they don't get more for more work and less for less work.

5. Discussions and Suggestions

From the perspective of view, the author understands the intention behind the introduction of the relevant policy. In recent years, the scores-only theory has been prevalent, leading to excessive psychological pressure on many students, and depression disorders have become increasingly common among the youth population. According to “China's National Mental Health Development Report (2019~2020)”, 24.6% of adolescents are depressed, with 7.4% being severely depressed [6]. Therefore, the government intends to control the promotion of concepts such as the supremacy of scores, but in the course of implementation, it has gone too far, demotivating teachers and affecting the quality of education in schools. The emergence of private schools has exacerbated the negative effects of this policy, leading to a loss of resources for teachers in public schools, affecting the fairness of education for students from ordinary families who cannot afford private schools, and further aggravating the phenomenon of monopolization of education.

5.1. Devolving Power to School Principals

The author asked Principal Chen how this situation would be adjusted and faced. Principal Chen said that he could only expect the Education Department to devolve power to school principals. Nowadays, principals do not have the power to reward or penalize teachers for their teaching performance, making it impossible for leaders to do anything even if they want to make a difference. The author very much agrees with Principal Chen that the Government should monitor and regulate the operation process, rather than depriving schools of their powers directly.

5.2. Improving the Status and Treatment of Teachers

At the same time, the author also believes that the government should raise teachers' salaries at the basic education stage and ensure that the salaries of primary and secondary school teachers are not lower than the average salary income of local civil servants. “The Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Staff Construction in the New Era” also clearly state that the status and treatment of teachers should be continuously improved, so as to truly make teaching an enviable profession [7]. This is because only when teachers are free from the pressure of survival can they have more energy to devote to education and better care for their students.

5.3. The Importance of the Leadership

During this interview, the author also asked Principal Chen whether it was possible for him, as a principal, to try his best to alleviate high teacher turnover and the impact on the fairness of education before the adjustment of the policy. Principal Chen talked about an example. After a math teacher (Ms. Wang) expressed to him the idea of jumping to Houde School in 2023, Principal Chen's conversation with her yielded good results. Principal Chen put himself in Ms. Wang's shoes and analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of this choice. Ms. Wang is 43 years old, and her family lives in the city center while Houde School is in the suburbs with a long daily commute. In that case, Ms. Wang can only live at school from Monday to Friday. However, Ms. Wang's son is still in junior high school this year, so if she jumps ship, she will only be able to stay with her child on weekends. In addition, Ms. Wang herself was sick and had undergone an operation the year before, and although Houde School pays well, it is also very tiring, so Ms. Wang's body may not be able to cope with it. What is more, she would have to give up her retirement insurance, which she had paid for almost 20 years. And if she is dismissed by the private school for health reasons, she will be in a state of

unemployment. After Principal Chen sincerely analyzed the situation, Ms. Wang finally chose to stay in the original school.

Leadership is a form of charisma and behavioral influence that can affect the long-term development of an organization or team [8]. This example confirms this. Principal Chen has left an outstanding teacher in his school with his sincere, friendly, and empathetic communication. As an educator, Principal Chen did not choose to give up forging ahead even in a very hostile environment. He still strived to maximize the quality of education for the students in his school. Principal Chen's perseverance in upholding educational equity with wisdom and love even when conditions are difficult can be taken as an example for every educator.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the author conducted an interview with a front-line education leader, from which the equity between private schools and public schools was discussed. In addition, the paper also explores the influence of teachers' salaries on educational achievements, the role of leadership in educational organization and management, and whether the new education laws and regulations promulgated by the government in recent years are reasonable. Through concrete examples and sharp contrasts, this paper shows the influence of private schools poaching excellent teachers with high salaries on public school teachers and the negative effect of canceling the reward mechanism after the promulgation of the new regulations on hindering teachers' teaching enthusiasm. Finally, based on the personal experience of the interviewee, this paper gives a demonstration of the role that leaders can play in promoting educational equity, showing that a leader's personal charm can play an important role in education. Finally, more concrete examples of educational monopoly in private schools can be added in future studies. In addition, the long-term development trend of private schools and their influence on the education field can also be studied to explore the possible changes in the education field.

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