

Gauging and Comparing Teachers' Equitable Leadership in Selected Schools in China

Shuliang Gong *, Rodil F. Fadri

Graduate School, College of Education and Liberal Arts, Adamson University, Manila, CO 0900, Philippines

* Corresponding author: Shuliang Gong (Email: 270177701@qq.com)

Abstract: The study assessed the respondents' equitable leadership and made a comparative analysis based on their profile. The teachers' equitable leadership measure was based on the following parameters: directions, relationships and people development, organizational support, instructional programs, and accountability. The results showed that the respondents have a good level of teacher equitable leadership. The comparative analysis showed no significant differences in the respondents' equitable leadership based on the respondents' profile. It implies that the respondents' field of expertise, years of teaching experience, and educational attainment have no bearing on their equitable leadership. The findings revealed an encouraging situation for the involved schools. A good level of teachers' equitable leadership means that the school can sustain initiatives for equity.

Keywords: Educational Equity; Teacher Equitable Leadership.

1. Introduction

Educational inequity remains a part of societies across the globe, as shown by significant differences in education outcomes linked to economic status, gender, race, and ethnicity. One piece of evidence is the OECD 2018 PISA report, which showed a large and increasing achievement gap between wealthier and poorer students and between immigrant and non-immigrant students [1]. According to Chmielewska [2], there is strong evidence of growing gaps between rich and poor students over the past 50 years across the majority of one hundred countries examined. Even in wealthy countries, inequality is also an issue. For example, in Australia, the achievement gap between students' top and bottom economic groups is equivalent to about three years of schooling [3]. There is a similar trend in Finland, and according to Sahlberg [4], poor-performing students are most affected by inequity. In the US, concerns about inequity have also been prompted by racial differences in how schools implement discipline policies [5],[6].

The foundation of educational equity is equal access to education. Universal access to education is essential to break the cycle of inequality and promote inclusive development [7]. According to Parker et al. [8], PISA data since 2000 showed that inequity has a negative relationship with academic excellence in terms of change over time—educational equity in public education results in societal inequality [9]. One of the principles of educational equity is inclusion. It means that all children receive at least a minimum level of education and the right to quality education [10]. Another principle is adequacy. It means that the minimum education level should also be able to reach a certain standard. Brighthouse et al. [11] refer to it as the level of education children need to have a flourishing adult life. Failing to address inclusion and adequacy issues in education can result in higher youth unemployment, low economic growth, higher incidences of crime [12], and lower life expectancy [13].

In China, the main problems of educational equity are the quality gap between urban and rural education, the development gap between regions, and the achievement gap

between socioeconomic classes [14]. These problems persist despite the significant improvement in narrowing the educational gap through the government's promotion of gender equality and compulsory education. In rural areas, inequity continues to endure because of poverty [15]. There are still high dropout rates for girls [14], and rural schools are closing quickly [16]. Teacher allocation to rural areas could be much higher compared to urban areas. Even the academic qualifications of teachers favor the urban areas, resulting in rural children getting lower-quality education. There is also a vast disparity in the allocation of academic resources between metropolitan areas and rural regions in China. Urban schools get more resources, making them a desirable destination for rural students which results in overcrowding in the city schools [17]. In this situation, students from rural areas and those from lower economic classes are disadvantaged significantly. Children whose parents have no stable jobs, low incomes, and no social ties are more likely to be rejected by public schools [18]. Wealthy parents can have their children easily selected in private schools [19].

With equity becoming increasingly crucial in educational policies, policymakers and school leaders must share a vision about it [20]. School leaders are essential to the success of any pivotal change in educational institutions [21]. In China, school leaders are seen as significant players in equity initiatives (Liou and Liang, 2021). School principals are often called to nurture educational equity [22],[23]. Government policies require school principals to promote equitable student outcomes [24], raise student achievement, and narrow the gaps between high and low achievers. School leaders in China are expected to enhance equity in curriculum, instructional practices, assessment and evaluation, and community involvement [25].

Leithwood [26] believes principals and teachers must implement an equity solution. According to Alvarez [27], teacher leadership is essential to the school's equity efforts. Teacher leadership is about empowering and influencing colleagues to represent individual and collective interests. Teacher leadership emerged in China as educational reforms expanded the familiar teachers' roles, enabling them to

participate in school-related affairs like curriculum development, staff training, school improvement, school management, and decision-making instead of being confined to classroom instruction [28]. Any teacher can be a leader if they embrace their roles. Most Chinese teachers surveyed by Zhou et al. [29] are qualified as teacher leaders based on the criteria they developed and validated: perception, influence, cooperation, and knowledge and skills. What is interesting to know is whether Chinese teachers also have equitable leadership abilities.

Leithwood [26] defines equitable leadership as transformational practices geared towards more significant school equity. It is the ability of a typical teacher with no formal leadership designation to empower and influence colleagues toward promoting equity in education. Leithwood's [26] framework of equitable leadership has five domains: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, designing organizational support, improving instructional programs, and securing accountability. Setting directions is about identifying specific goals for equity, sharing equity vision, and communicating them. On the other hand, building relationships and developing people promotes teacher growth, providing support, modeling the school's values, and building working relationships with teachers and parents. In designing the organization's support, leaders must create a collaborative culture and productive relationships with families and communities. In improving the instructional program, leaders should provide instructional support to colleagues and participate with colleagues in professional learning activities. Lastly, securing accountability involves promoting internal responsibility and meeting external accountability demands. The specific indicators for the five domains will be tailored to the capacities of teacher leaders.

Recognizing the importance of educational equity in society's plight, the researcher hoped to contribute to its enhancement. The study assessed the equitable leadership of teachers and is expected to contribute to the literature on equitable leadership among Chinese teachers. According to Zhang and Koshmanova [30], there are only a few Chinese studies on educational equity from the perspective of teacher leadership. Zhu and Song [31] added that multiple equity perspectives in education are still needed.

The study is anchored on the Distributive Justice Theory developed by John Rawls in 1971. The theory describes justice as fairness, which consists of liberty and equality [32]. Equity is characterized by fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle. Fair equality of opportunity means that every person should have the right to education. Governments should distribute educational liberties and resources so that it becomes the most significant benefit to the least advantaged students. The difference principle recognizes the inequality in society in terms of wealth. The government should balance educational opportunities to eliminate the disadvantage of the poor members of society. The Distributive Justice Theory justifies the teachers' promotion of equity in education in their schools.

The study is also anchored on the Empowerment Theory pioneered by Julian Rappaport in 1981. The theory posits that empowered individuals can become stronger and more confident in representing their interests and others. It can be a self-process or enabled by others' support. The theory explains how ordinary teachers without formal designation can influence relationships toward equity in education.

Teacher equitable leadership can be seen as a form of empowerment as well. Setting directions, building relationships and developing people, designing organizational support, improving instructional programs, and securing accountability are acts of empowerment to other teachers.

2. Methodology

The study used a quantitative method. It quantitatively described teachers' equitable leadership levels regarding directions, relationships and people development, organizational support, instructional programs, and accountability. It also determined whether there is a significant difference in the equitable leadership of teachers based on their field of expertise, number of years in teaching, and educational attainment. The researcher gathered data through a survey that involved 206 teacher respondents randomly selected from 442 teachers in selected middle schools in Hebei, China. The researchers developed the instrument used in the survey. Experts validated it and pilot-tested it. It has a good level of reliability. Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the hypothesis due to the non-normal data distribution shown by the Shapiro-Wilk normality test ($p = .000$).

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Teacher Equitable Leadership

Domains	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Directions	3.21	0.45	Good
Relationship and People Development	3.13	0.47	Good
Organizational Support	3.22	0.46	Good
Instructional Program	3.22	0.47	Good
Accountability	3.15	0.46	Good
Overall	3.19	0.41	Good

Table 1 shows the respondents' equitable teacher leadership. Its overall mean of 3.19 shows that the respondents are good at leading and influencing their colleagues toward educational equity in their schools. Their best abilities are in terms of instructional programs and organizational support. These sub-variables got the highest mean of 3.22. Good equitable teacher leadership in instructional programs indicates that the respondents can support colleagues and students. They are good at making themselves accessible to students for their learning needs. The respondents are also good at providing instructional support to colleagues to promote equity in their classes. Furthermore, they encourage their colleagues to monitor the students' learning and guide them in using differentiated instruction and student-centered approaches. Chinese teachers provide instructional support to colleagues. They are confident they can mentor their colleagues, believing it is for student learning and achievement [33]. They also practice differentiated instruction. According to Qian [34], Chinese e-commerce teachers recognize the individual student's needs and adapt teaching to their differences. It seems, however, that the respondents are having difficulty monitoring their students in the second classroom. This is possible because student organizations also handle students in the second classroom.

The good level of equitable leadership in terms of organizational support indicates that respondents are good at collaborating and creating trust with the school community

members. The respondents' ability to collaborate for educational equity is well documented. Jiang and Fadri [33] revealed that Chinese teachers are willing to collaborate with colleagues. Their ability to organize collective work is high [35]. Chinese teachers can also organize professional learning, as seen in their sustainable professional learning communities [36]. The respondents are also good at organizing teacher groups for professional education and building productive relationships with student families. They can rally support among colleagues in support of resources for equity goals. Another thing that they are good at is collaborating with colleagues and encouraging them to take active roles in the school's equity initiatives. What seems challenging for the respondents is supporting changes in the school organization to maximize parents' cooperation.

Teacher equitable leadership in terms of direction obtained a mean of 3.21. This indicates that the respondents have a good ability to set a vision for educational equity. The respondents are capable of communicating the school's equity vision to parents. Moreover, the respondents are good at espousing a solid commitment to the success of all students through actions. The respondents participate in setting directions for school equity because they know it is also about implementing good educational standards.

The respondents' ability to set direction for educational equity manifests what Shen [28] called the "expanded roles" of Chinese teachers. According to Shen [28], Chinese teachers' roles have expanded from mere classroom instruction to involvement in school-related affairs, improvement, and decision-making. Chinese teachers can espouse a solid commitment to all students' success, as they have always believed [33]. Chinese teachers can set direction in other situations, such as in professional learning communities. According to Zhou and Fadri [36], Chinese teachers who participate in learning professional communities know how to share common values and norms.

The mean of 3.15 for accountability shows that the respondents have a good ability in building a sense of responsibility among colleagues in meeting the demands of equity. They encourage colleagues to take active roles in school-based equity initiatives. The respondents are also good at recognizing colleagues for their contributions to successful equity programs. They celebrate small successes in pursuing equity to boost morale and motivate colleagues to set bigger goals. What seems to be challenging for the respondents is their colleagues' performance considerably. The respondents do not push much on training their colleagues to be accountable. Moreover, they do not try hard to have an accountability mechanism.

Of the five domains of teacher equitable leadership, relationships, and people development, the lowest mean is 3.13. This implies that the respondents must improve more in this area. They can support their colleagues in their quest for educational equity, build trust among school community members, and demonstrate values for educational equity to encourage colleagues to do the same. Still, they have to do a little bit more. What is even more challenging to the respondents is challenging their colleagues' beliefs and values, which are antithetical to equitable practices. Building relationships and promoting people's development in general is not new to Chinese teachers. It is a common practice in professional learning communities [29] where Chinese teacher's influence on colleagues is more about professional development. It is also practiced by teacher leaders through

sharing their expertise with colleagues [37], assisting colleagues who need help [33], and providing peer support [38].

Table 2. Comparison of Teacher Equitable Leadership

Domains	Kruskal-Wallis H	Sig	Interpretation
Field of Expertise	0.0710	.701	Not Significant
Years of Teaching Experience	1.058	.787	Not Significant
Highest Educational Attainment	5.331	.070	Not Significant

As presented in Table 2, the comparison of the respondents' overall equitable leadership has no significant differences based on the field of expertise, years of teaching experience, and highest educational attainment. Regarding the field of expertise, the respondents were grouped into science and engineering, social science, and humanities. The differences in the groups' equitable leadership mean ranks are insignificant ($H = 0.0710$ and $Sig = .701$). It shows that the field of expertise of the respondents does not influence at all in leading their colleagues toward educational equity. There is also no significant difference in the respondents' years of teaching, with $H = 1.058$ and $Sig = 0.787$. Whether the respondents have 1-5 years of experience, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and 16 years and above does not matter to teacher equitable leadership. The differences in assessing equitable leadership based on the highest educational attainment are insignificant. It has $H = 5.331$ and $Sig = .070$. It means that whether the respondents have a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctorate does not influence the teacher's equitable leadership. Based on these results, the hypothesis is not rejected. There is no significant difference in equitable leadership based on the respondents' profiles. The finding is similar to what Dan [37] revealed about Chinese teachers' leadership and their profile. She claimed that teacher leadership is not significantly different based on the teachers' age, specialization, educational attainment, and years of teaching.

4. Conclusion

The study highlighted the good level of equitable leadership among teachers. They can influence their colleagues toward educational equity by setting directions, building relationships and developing people, providing organizational support, encouraging accountability, and supporting instructional programs. With a good baseline of equitable leadership, the respondents have the potential to excel further in educational equity. The study also showed that teacher equitable leadership is not significantly different based on the respondents' profiles. This indicates a favorable situation for promoting educational equity in China. Since there are no significant differences in the respondents' overall equitable leadership, the schools can expect support from teachers across the fields of expertise, across the strata of teaching experiences, and educational attainment. The students can expect an equitable learning environment, whoever their teacher is.

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