

A middle tier space to support a high-performing school system in Shanghai



© Qucheng Miao. Professor presents at a youth science camp at East China Normal University in Shanghai.

To improve teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need whole-system support to build professionalism and enhance their practice. Roles at the middle tier of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, offer unique capacities to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations, and provide instructional direction to school-level practitioners.

This research, conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust (EDT), explores how middle-tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change to improve the quality of education. It focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policy-makers and practitioners.

IIEP and EDT conducted case studies in five jurisdictions – Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales – where new roles have been created or existing roles re-oriented towards coaching and support. The studies explored the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, and the enabling factors present in the systems in which they work.

This country note uncovers how the middle-tier structure in Shanghai evolved into a mature system contributing to the outstanding results in international learning assessments.

BOX 1

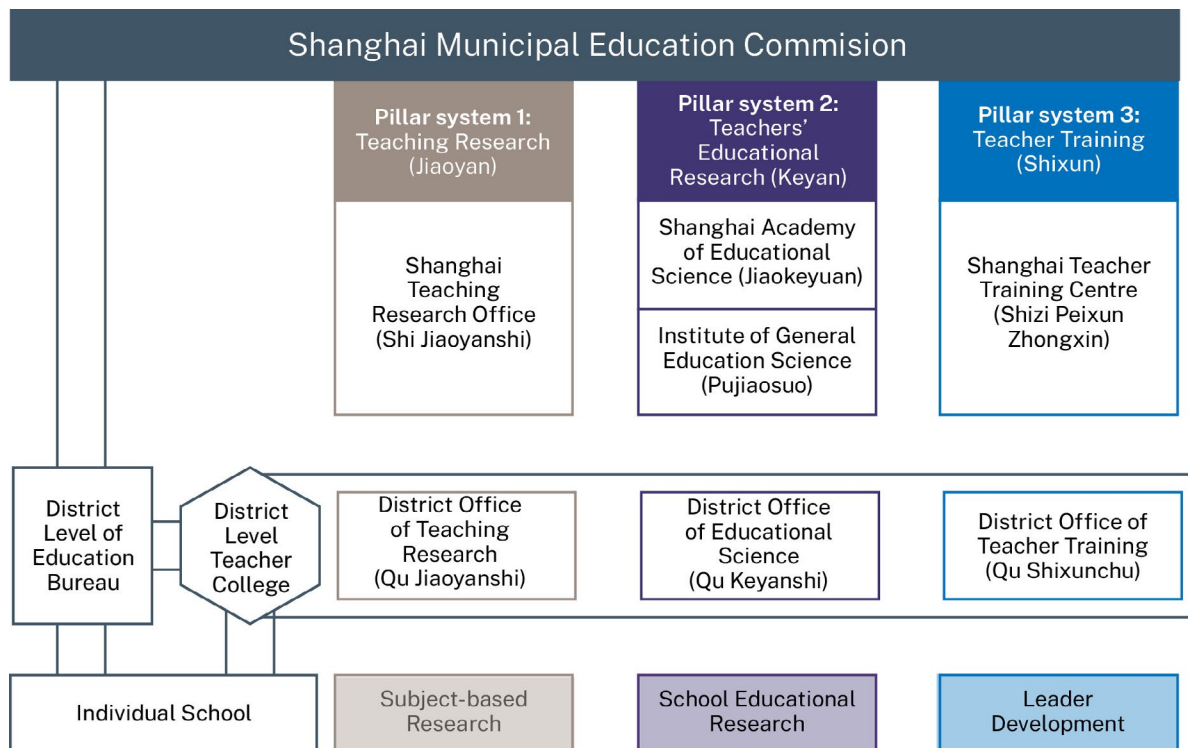
Methodology

This case study, conducted in early 2021, adopted a qualitative methodology. Researchers used both archive data, such as policy documents, and previous research in Chinese. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews and five focus groups were carried out involving middle-tier officers, teachers and master teachers running master studios, scholars, and staff involved in recruiting master officers.

Overview of Shanghai's three-pillar system

Despite the excellent performance of the Shanghai education system, a thorough understanding of the structural mechanisms that make it so successful is missing. The three-pillar system currently in place for Shanghai's middle-tier space stems from an experimental reform enacted in 2014 (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Simplified three-pillar administrative-professional structure of Shanghai education system



Source: adapted from Chen and Zhang (2022)

This piece of research examines two fixed, full-time middle tier roles and one additional programme, with part-time, middle-tier roles filled on an ad hoc basis.

An official professional structure, which is hierarchically located under the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, manages the system at municipal level. It is organized around three pillars: the Municipal Teaching Research Office, overseeing the improvement of teaching; the Institute of General Education Science, supervising educational research projects; and the Shanghai Teacher Training Centre, running the Master Studio Programme for selected teachers. Further along the hierarchy is the District Level Teacher College that is the counterpart for the municipal level structure. Finally, school-level personnel, such as directors and teachers, work closely with municipal and district officers.

Shanghai's middle tier within the three pillar systems

Pillar 1 – Teaching research system: The Shanghai Teaching Research Office, dating back to 1949, was originally intended to be a training facility for teacher education. Today its staff, the teaching research officers, are involved in a host of activities including curriculum management, subject teaching, and textbook design. As part of their routine, teaching research officers observe 30 lessons each term and organize open teaching seminars. In addition, they develop high-quality textbooks by translating curriculum standards for teachers and helping them innovate. They further prepare student assessment and feedback by organizing examinations or field assessments. The aim of this pillar system is to improve classroom teaching at municipal or district level through the work of teaching research officers.

We teaching research officers know far better than regular teachers and scholars about the gaps between curriculum standards, textbooks, teachers' use, and student learning. (Teaching research officer)

Pillar 2 – Educational research system: With regard to this pillar, educational research officers are tasked with organizing and guiding teachers' research projects, advising reforms in individual schools, and identifying and promoting teaching best practices at municipal or district level. The objective of Pillar 2 is to help teachers enhance their problem-solving and educational capabilities. Every teacher in Shanghai is required to conduct educational research projects grounded in their practice and developed for their practice.

We are teachers' professional partners. We ask questions with them; we offer companionship to them on the path of educational reform. (Educational research officer)

Pillar 3 – Teacher training system: A concrete application of this pillar, whose primary objective is to foster educational professional development, is the experimental Master Studio Programme. Selected mentors, named master principals, and master teachers, constitute a pool of around nine members, usually instructional leaders at the municipal or district level. The programme is articulated over a period of three to five years, including lectures and direct applications such as teaching demonstrations, mentoring, and research. The Shanghai Teacher Training Centre allocates the Master Studio Programme's financial resources and defines the programme, while programme members are supported by local district-level teacher training offices.

Impacts on the Shanghai system

A proactive and institutionalized middle tier facilitates many positive outcomes in the education system of Shanghai. In the light of the ever-transforming educational environment in the Chinese metropolis, the middle tier sustains the role of mediator among all stakeholders. In Shanghai, the middle-tier space acts both as a resource pool

Table 1. Structure and learning activities in the Master Studio Programme

Three-level structure	Municipal level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategic plan and central funding from the Task Force Office of Teacher Professional Development in Shanghai Municipal Education Commission – Management, coordination, and supporting service by the Shanghai Teacher Training Centre – Studio liaison reports and communicates with the centre
	District level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Manage and support district members by district education bureaus and district teacher schools – Nurture district-level pool of potential instructional leaders
	School level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide venue and resources for the studio school-based activities – Reduce workload of members
Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Chairs are selected from experienced master teachers, master principals, or outstanding members from the last programme – Members apply voluntarily and are selected by the chairs (junior teachers have opportunities but most are aspiring instructional leaders) 	
Professional learning activities of the studio	Under the leadership of the chair and shared learning goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Shared professional interests of the chair and members – Goal-oriented, problem-solving-focused, task-driven professional learning – Plan–implementation–outcome–report – Learning activities around project research, open lecture, forum discussion, teaching demonstration, lesson study, mentoring new members, publications (journal articles and monographs)

and a buffer in case of tensions, thus proving to be a fundamental piece of the educational administration puzzle.

We did not know whether it would work, how it could work, and what it would mean for teachers. We turned the reform needs into projects, and then we used projects to promote reforms and to lead reforms. We had to experiment and pilot first. We used the projects to investigate and discover rules (the theory for practice) and approaches to the reform. With that knowledge, we improved and expanded our practice to move the reform forward. (Education research officer)

Middle-tier space as enabler for transferring new policies into practice

Reforms at municipal level usually take a long time until they are received ubiquitously. A crucial function of the middle tier in Shanghai is actively piloting and testing new initiatives with selected school officials. Moreover, the middle tier facilitates scaling up at the district level whenever schools need an exchange platform with other institutions. On the other hand, this brings in a whole new set of challenges; in this case research officers are of paramount importance in establishing a general and comprehensive development framework. Finally, middle-tier leaders ensure that schools are nurturing an open mindset to change by being at the forefront of educational policy-making.

Middle-tier space supports strong knowledge and evidence ecosystem

In Shanghai, research for evidence-based and adaptive policy-making is a core concern at all levels of management. Indeed, middle-tier actors are pivotal in informing new educational policy proposals from the city government based on both ex-ante and implementation evaluations. Therefore, they

act as a link between all involved stakeholders as they also offer guidance to schools in navigating projects and practices. The middle-tier space in Shanghai is further concerned with showcasing evidence and innovations from practitioner experiments. That means uncovering and escalating local best practices, pertaining to single schools or teachers, to higher levels of the educational system.

Middle-tier space for adapting and redistributing resources to meet changing local needs

Thanks to their proximity to local schools and teachers, middle-tier officers are tasked with promoting a level playing field by addressing existing disparities. Not only do middle-tier personnel intervene whenever schools are in need of guidance or resources to further their development, but they also intervene when there is a shortage of skills at school level. The system relies on having outstanding principals trained through the Master Studio Programme. The new principals are often former teachers with little experience in management, and the Master Studio Programme intervenes in narrowing these disparities.

Before I became a principal, I was a Chinese teacher, then a school manager, and then a teaching researcher in Chinese. I am very grateful to the studio, because when I became the principal, I shifted from a teaching researcher specialized in the language subject but had no clue about overall management. It was overwhelming, and I had feelings of panic. I had no idea about management, planning, financing, and curriculum design. I then joined the studio of a senior experienced principal in our district. The studio was a great platform for me to receive training from senior experts and university professors in curriculum development, planning, and financing. (School principal)

Challenges

Highly selective and meritocratic environment. The middle-tier space is a highly competitive working environment. Only a small fraction of all teachers in the Shanghai educational system become part of the middle-tier space due to the high level of self-determination and initiative required to access the target positions. Once there, the leaders are expected to benefit from the prestige and respect of these roles, which are also associated with increased financial funding for projects compared with teachers.

Dilemmas: motivation versus performativity and collaboration versus competition. Due to the high level of competition and accountability, not only among middle-tier professionals but also among schools, the system runs the risk of only pursuing reforms for the sake of competition. In turn, this can be detrimental to relationship building, openness, trust, and respect, which are at the heart of successful learning communities (Usoro et al., 2007). Another problem is that the intervention may incentivize competitive behaviour in the Shanghai middle tier to the extent that it reduces transparency and sharing among the different levels, as members of the education

workforce try to gain advantage through personal or local initiatives.

Complex contextual constraints. Challenges to scaling up best practices in Shanghai include a wide variation in local contexts and hence capabilities. Even though middle-tier officers can facilitate the processes, the cost of failed projects is high in terms of both social and financial capital.

Teachers' reluctance towards an ever-changing environment. Educational reforms in Shanghai's educational system have been frequent, and the enabling support from the middle-tier space has made it possible for school-level workers to generally accept the ever-changing scenario. However, this change-focused system is not free from criticism: teachers complain that the increasing workload from middle-tier projects adds to the standard teaching requirements and workload. This results in many teachers becoming indifferent to projects or giving up on them altogether. It must be said that many professionals involved find purpose in affecting change in the educational system and feel personally rewarded with the work they do, even though this might be at odds with their immediate personal interest.



© Lan Shen. A training meeting session, a frequent setting for learning led by a middle-tier instructional leader in schools.

I love my subject. I have strong passion in developing our subject and its curriculum reform. Some people chatted with me and suggested me to save my energy at this stage when I have all the rewards and recognition. I could let it go, but I couldn't help. I just want to contribute all I could do for our subject reform and subject teacher development ... This is my life pursuit. (Master principal, chair of a Master Studio)

Takeaways

1. Local educators in middle-tier roles can foster capacity development

The Shanghai educational system prides itself on having been able to carve out a successful ecosystem by leveraging local and talented middle-tier leaders: it strongly relies on the power of the system in self-improving.

In the view of the city's educational planners, the internal way towards capacity development, obtained through the valorization of domestic talent, is preferred to the ready-made solutions coming from abroad as it is more sustainable in the longer term.

2. Middle tier's role in reducing schools' isolation

A crucial function of the Shanghai middle-tier space is being able to bridge inequalities among local contexts. Since middle-tier officers are separated from each school's management, they can supervise a large number of educational establishments and hence assess the bigger picture. By supporting all schools, offering professional support for teachers, and building a powerful platform for sharing best practices, middle-tier leaders are key to reducing disparities across all levels of the educational system. Another benefit that derives from Shanghai's experience is that of tight-knit teachers' professional learning communities, which are encouraged and supported by the middle tier. Furthermore, a strong sense of community is being cultivated by middle-tier leaders as they strive to balance competition and capacity development.

3. Government resources are needed for a well-functioning middle tier

All of the above-mentioned middle-tier reforms and projects require a resource-intensive commitment from government. Funding for projects, high-quality human resources and time for testing are all crucial elements for implementing middle-tier activities successfully. In addition to these components, governmental officials need to have leadership and policy-making skills that complement those of middle-tier leaders in order to produce a long-standing commitment.

Author

Chloé Chimier, Guglielmo Fasana,
Barbara Tournier

Contacts

For more information, please
contact:
Barbara Tournier
Programme Specialist
b.tournier@iiep.unesco.org

iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders
[edt.org](http://iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders)

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