

Typical cases of Learning Communities in China:

Sense of Security,belonging and Impact Field

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Abstract: This article chooses several representative learning communities and conducts a more in-depth observation. From the operation idea, the education idea, the ways of students' selecting, the curriculum systems, the supplementary activities, the teaching management and other aspects, the author attempts to analyze how the learning communities satisfy people's psychological demands, such as sense of security and belonging.

In recent years, many families with common educational ideas have gathered together to form learning communities. What are the characteristics of these self-sufficient learning communities in China? What are the differences between the children in these learning communities and other children who are home schooling and who are in the school environment? In an educational environment such as China, which still follows the system track, what inspiration do the cases of these learning communities bring to us? I have chosen several typical cases from many learning communities for in-depth observation and interviews.

Part one : Introduction of background

First, we should need to know: what causes some cities to arise the phenomena of learning communities? After in-depth observation, mainly based on the following reasons:

1. Teaching resources and opportunities for homeschooling alone are very limited.

In many homeschooling families, the children receive major subjects' education by themselves. When they enter certain grade, they will choose the nearest course guidance classes to strengthen the study of professional subjects. For example, Daddy Zhang in the city of Shangqiu in Henan province took his daughter of nine-Year-old to participate in the training course of the college entrance examinations. In addition, the choices of extra-curricular interests' classes are a lot of homeschooling families the main auxiliary choice. Children not only focus on the abilities of academics, but also on the arts, sports, hands-on skills, technology and other aspects. A lot of intellectual families with social resources choose the ways of 'parents exchanging classes', such as children from family B go to family A to take part in piano lessons, family B's father teaches the children Taekwondo classes. But for many ordinary families, they do not have such good resources, they only can do

is to pay for the teachers, or to take crowd-funding classes. Some of the types of crowd-funding Apps (mainly for English lessons) are very popular. In this regard, parents need to have a strong ability to collect information and social skills. For example, the STEM curriculum of science and technology teachers are very difficult to find. I once went to a mechanical professional vocational school in Beijing, and occasionally I found that their school is the national strategic training base of aviation. The professional teachers here are very willing to teach gifted students, of course, the tuition fee is not cheap, a class (2 hours or so) for three students costs at least 2000 Yuan (excluding material costs). It is equivalent to one-third of the monthly income of an ordinary family in Beijing.

2. Children need more meta experiences.

In the real life learning environment, besides study, children also should take a lot of necessary growth experiences, such as doing housework, participating in community services, the necessary social activities, or even preliminary professional experience. If we only rely on the social resources of parents, efficiency and effectiveness are very limited. Many ordinary families lack of resources. Vocational training itself is very professional. A mother in Dali, Yunnan Province, told me that her older daughter had been homeschooling to high school, and she later found that many social practice experiences should be supported by social groups. She gathered several capable parents, and finally she built the ‘Mao-Mao Cool’ School. But this school is like a magnified family and a community. Thus, each family can put their own family's unique social resources into a public platform for sharing. Chen Gang, the founder of the ‘Mao-Mao Cool’ School told me that they are carrying out a grand called ‘the City Studio Program’, with Dali's rich art studio resources, letting the learning classroom scattered, distributed to every area of the city, so that children can study and feel while walking through their cities in the process of learning.

3. Social needs of peer groups.

Many children of homeschooling have different habits, such as chess, Taekwondo, instrumental music playing, painting, manipulating robots. Some children are skilled in these habits. They need a especial group to communicate each other. Children who go to school often do not have a regular fellowship with them because of the heavy schoolwork and busy timetable, and the most fundamental reason is that their families’ values vary widely. Besides their families' siblings, these children need more intimate and consistently shared peer group. In the case of my research, the children of these families, through the learning communities platform, are with a common hobby of small partners group. They can not only share the learning resources, but also get support from the daily and partners’ exchanges, which is very helpful for their personality growth. Developmental psychology theory holds that during the adolescence, peer interaction constructs an important reference for the development of adolescent personality, as a mirror of personality.

4. The need for a rich community activities.

Some children with national culture studies or religious backgrounds tend to choose to take part in regular community activities. Many children who are scattered of homeschooling will choose cultural events published on Apps platforms like "Activity on Line". Many we-chat communities take the membership system (fees or free). There are special events (Reading Club, fitness camp, etc., but for young people are not much.) In Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou such big cities, there are high-quality cultural salon activities monthly on the average. Enthusiastic parents will organize these activities, but other non-core cities do not have so much resources. They usually take their own irregular visits to the city exhibition halls, libraries, watching performances, exhibitions and other activities. The information channel and the professional explanation service are what the children of homeschooling need most besides the subject studying. In this regard, if the parents do not have the professional ability, the cost will be relatively high. At the GET 2017 Meeting (Global Education Technology Meeting), I saw many professional organizations and companies developing many extracurricular activities, but the fees were higher and the types are very limited. Most of the activities just copy from Scout (Mainland China is not authorized by Scout Training. Many of these companies copy the training methods).

5. The spiritual support of the community.

For most Chinese people, living within the system means security, leaving the system means one should be wholly responsible for himself. About 99% of the Chinese people will not choose to live outside the system. As a school's vocational guidance teacher, I know that many masters and doctoral graduates will choose to work as civil servants instead of choosing to start a business or go to a new research field job. Some communities with Christian background only offer distance courses, textbooks, courseware services. It is difficult to do more meticulous service in spiritual support. A lot of spiritual support is carried out through sporadic worship activities and thematic activities. I occasionally provide psychological services for some homeschooling families, but limited to the type of children's personality, career planning. Some homeschooling families will go through primary school at grade three or four, or not later than grade six, if they can not hold on, they will return to the system studying.

These may be superficial reasons, there are deep reasons which are: the sense of belonging, security, emotional links, and shared resources. My personal identify of learning community for home education is: this is an organic, informal group with a strong sense of security and a deep common understanding of education. It should be pointed out that the cases in my paper do not have formal education qualifications, because private schools need to undergo a very complex examination, approval process and harsh conditions. These learning communities have some tact strategy. They cooperate with the schools with legal qualification nearby. But I do see that they are faced with regular government inspections, ordered to suspend,

but for various reasons, the termination of the instructions can not be implemented in reality.

Part Two: Cases presentation

I have chosen three typical learning communities from a variety of cases. Their typical points are: the community resources they rely on, the cultural concept of the background, and their operation and sustainable ways. These three cases have different characteristics.

1. Family School of traditional cultural characteristics.

I observed the Holy Children's school in Shangqiu, Henan province. The founder of the school, President Zhang, many years ago discovered that the concept of school in the system and his values are very different, he feared that children in school and social environment would be misled, he resolutely took his daughter for home education. In fact, his daughter in school was good at study, and teachers and classmates also like her. President Zhang invented a software for learning Chinese characters, his wife was a primary school teacher, and later resigned full-time home to teach his daughter. The girl applied for a college exam when she was nine years old. The incident was a sensation throughout Henan Province. When I met his daughter, she was 11 years old. At the age of 10, the little girl took the college exam again to get a better score. She is now studying at a local college. This again became sensational news in local area. The daughter is very fond of reading. She is a quiet and self-disciplined girl. She has her own future plan, and also has her own independent views of her life. She becomes the school's little teacher in summer holiday. In summer vacation, every day she taught her younger brother and other students. There are currently five permanent children. Of the four boys, two are clearly superior in IQ. One girl has an average IQ, but her art feels is good. These children are under the age of 12 and already on a math course similar to grade eight. They could discuss exercises altogether. Judging from the state of their class, they had entered the state of autonomous learning.

President Zhang invited a local venerable old gentleman who was also a wealthy local entrepreneur. The old gentleman gave lectures to the children and parents on a regular basis. Some of the lectures are likely traditional culture, such as filial piety, unity, and the emphasis on obedience to parents and teachers.

Zhang also admits that he lacks art courses and technology courses. In China's second-tier cities such as Shangqiu, where excellent teachers are scarce. His goal is very realistic: let ordinary family children, in a relaxed environment, early enter the university entrance test, so they could have a more obvious age advantage.

Shangqiu's children's school is just one of many schools in China with traditional culture. They do not have a formal qualification. They cooperate with the surrounding formal schools. Such small learning communities, their organization is relatively loose. Students number is mobile and the quality of teaching depends on the founder of the degree of investment in education.

2. Self-Help community withholding core philosophy

Mao-Mao Cool Community in Dali, Yun Nan Province, has a primary school (68 students and teachers, now up to grade four) and a kindergarten (about 100 children and teachers). I took my child there for more than one month (two times). My child experienced half a month in elementary school and kindergarten both.

This learning community relies on the idea of "autonomy and freedom". Similar to a "contract" based on a voluntary basis. Founder Chen Gang has a background in foreign countries' work, and he agrees with the spirit of contract that the local elites have followed in the colonial period of North America. He also believes that in this Eden, the spirit of contract is the basic to keep the school normal operation since foundation. In order to let himself and friends of children have a more relaxed environment, and to match the children's nature developing rules, he and his friends set up a kindergarten and primary school, he evacuated the management of the core, mainly responsible for the psychological support of parents. The community operates mainly on Committee of Parents. (11 representatives, 2 school teacher representatives, others are parents representatives, an average of two parents representatives per grade, and a general parent representative)

Although the school has a board of directors, it meets few times a year. Most of the administration's day-to-day work is discussed by the chief executive (as a volunteer-serving parent) in the we-chat group, and most of the cases will be positively answered and supported by parents soon.

Admissions are subject to interviews, but mainly to parents. The questions that are asked by the representatives of the board directors and focused on the concept of values. Rigid requirement is that the child must be raised by the parents, not by their grandparents.

As a professional teacher, I found that the knowledge of the implementation needed to improve on grade 1, 2 and 3. One of the things that interested me most was that teachers spent a lot of time outside the classroom, dealing with the students' emotional problems, and helping them understand the social rules within the school, communicating with their parents, and focusing on giving encouragement, support and attention.

I observed that teachers were more individualistic and more relaxed in their mental state, and they treated their students as naturally as their own family members. Because the school is flat management, so the teachers are equal to each other. The first week I started the research, I felt that apart from the headmaster and the teacher who was responsible for receiving me, the PE teacher and the art teachers are warm to me, the other teachers seemed to feel a little distant, and then after one of my training sessions and private conversations, I found these young teachers very cute and they just needed time to understand me as an observer. It also needs to be observed and understood to determine whether I fully understand the school's teaching philosophy.

These teachers are not formally compiled, which means after they work for many years, they can not rely on these hard work to assess the title of education

inside of the system. Fortunately, the board has gave them a more stable salary. The average income is about 6,000 to 7,000 yuan a month, and the year-end assessment bonus (about 10,000 yuan). In Dali, it is already a relatively well-off income (the average local income is about 3500-4000 yuan monthly).

Different from the general school, the Mao-Mao Cool school each semester is about 10 weeks, and then a holiday about 7-10 days. Yunnan Dali and the surrounding' s climate is mild, and Dali has beautiful scenery. There will also be some interesting assignments for children of different ages to complete. At the end of each semester, there is only assessment, no test. The assessment process is similar to a realistic whole city adventure game. The children according to their grade will take different difficulty expedition task. Each individual request should be completed independently. (Even if midway for various reasons exits will not be judged as fail, but the teachers will write long comment for why the students has been failed and how the parents should help them.) An observer will accompany all the way, only records the process and gives the necessary protection, he can not provide the extra help and the hint. The exam lasted about 8 hours, sometimes longer. Not only do children need to find answers to their questions with limited clues, but they also need to talk to strangers for help, crossing unfamiliar neighborhoods or farms or even forests, challenging their stamina and will power.

Besides individual students, the others are from all over the country to come here to school. These families have a certain economic base. Dads are in business or work full-time, and mothers take care of the children. Meanwhile the school also requires occasional parents ' meetings and parents to attend as much as possible. I also saw that parents were very active in the weekly parent basket-ball games and hiking activities.

3. Learning Community relying on technology platform.

The third case is ETU School in Beijing. The founder of this school is a couple who are rich in foreign high education and management work experience. One of the founders(the husband) was a Silicon Valley network engineer who chaired the team to develop a teaching management system that essentially resembled a small family and the school's real-time interactive community. They also use a social App to invite people who have unique opinions to give speech every week on the platform and promote their recognized educational philosophies. Most of their fans are middle-class families with an average household income of more than 250,000 Yuan each year.

In the teaching management idea, they uphold the idea of "becoming the social elite" as the core, emphasizing the initiative of growth and the sense of responsibility to the society. The school has become known to many young parents in Beijing and around the country because of the novelty of the idea and the active promotion of the founders. Li Yinuo, one of the founders(the wife) , posted articles on two of her own we-chat public platform, each article with tens of thousands of readings and hundreds of of messages.

ETU School has stricter criteria for selecting children. Children and parents are interviewed separately. Children are focused on game observation to assess the overall quality, with particular emphasis on delayed gratification, teamwork, learning curiosity and other factors. Parents interview focuses on the family's economic income, consumption habits, education, educational concepts.

The teachers of ETU School have accumulated rich teaching experience in the public system, having adhering to the education of enthusiasm and obsession from abroad to China, foreign teachers hoping to be able to apply advanced teaching ideas to the teaching system in China, and teachers have good education feelings.

Some of the core courses, such as language and mathematics, are using the same books with the public system. Teachers' teaching process, will be more focused on children's ability to learn independently. Half of the time in the classroom to the teacher vivid guidance, the other half of the time is left to students under the guidance of independent study. A typical day is like this, after the morning course, at 10 to 12 o'clock of prime time, they will have project classes. In addition to yoga, drama and physical education in the afternoon, handicraft and painting are also taught in combination with the project system.

In addition to the formal curriculum, a lot of experience activities will be held, such as to go to the nearby parks for plant observation, the festivals to make cakes, opening ceremony in the Palace Museum, and such exciting activities.

ETU School's education model is suitable for families with certain economic conditions and learning resources. Many of the respondents said that their children's ability to learn autonomously has been significantly improved, the original inward timid personality has been changed, "very brave, willing to challenge their comfort zone. Although she has fear, but absolute firmness, stability. There is a goal she will overcome everything to finish. "A child's teacher evaluated the changes.

They also have passion for public benefit activities, such as the plan of a distance education system which is shared with schools in remote areas for free. But because of limited manpower, teachers use after-school part-time. Promotion is not very popular at present. Even so, the spirit should be encouraged.

The above records can only be a fragment of these representative schools. If there is a chance giving to me to attend the GHEC Meeting in 2018 and I will give a live speech, I will bring photos of the children's course, photos of their works, and some video. I will also share a rich and varied experience to everyone.

Part Three: Summary

First of all, these learning communities satisfy people's need for security, belonging and psychological support. When people return to closer interpersonal relationships, from in-depth understanding, and share the topic of common concern, there will be a more positive impact, diluting the outside world's anxiety. The

communities also provide a psychological shelter for children, waiting for their maturity so they can withstand more learning pressure. For individual families with psychological problems, they also assume the role of psychological healing.

Second, the learning communities form a multi-level field of influence, similar to a circle surrounded by several concentric circles. Because of its small size, the Holy Children's School's in Shangqiu's influence is limited to the parents of the students and the restricted groups interested in them. Mao-Mao Cool School do not actively expand to the outside world, but through many media reports, basically every week, many parents or professionals have come to the school for visit. The social impact of ETU School is much larger than the previous two. In addition to the parent-teacher meetings, the App community has tens of thousands of fans. These parents have different degrees of recognition and impact on values. For example, as the parents of students, will be more than the fans and other onlookers, have a firmer identity. Parents will consciously write the experience, published in the network to refute the community's doubts.

Third, the learning communities embody the distinctive characteristics of informal organizations: rules are made through collective discussion or repeated consultation, or the founder's visionary originality. The rules are based on the recognition of the common idea, not the external rigid rules and regulations. Its management mode of operation is also organic and flat. The teachers are acting as the school main actors (not the administrative staff) to carry out the management teaching process. The parents, the students and the teachers govern the school together and thus create an organic atmosphere. The decisions will thus not be deviated from educational goals under administrative pressure.

I personally think that even these small-scale learning communities still face the problem of the particularity of the educational object. Ordinary children and less than 1% of the intelligent children, they have greater difference on willpower and psychological tolerance. How do schools conduct more targeted educational guidance? In this respect, I see that for individual children with special talents, teachers' educational guidance methods are still in the process of exploration. In addition, the orientation of the school needs to be further defined along with the development: a free factory such as Summerhill School, or a base to train talents? The Holy Children's School offers possible opportunities for children of ordinary families in small cities to go to college; Mao-Mao Cool School is similar to Summerhill School, but each class has 1-2 children which are underfed with common lessons. ETU School may also face such problems in the future.