Chapter 12

Calling for Children Friendly Community Life: Voices of Children and Parents from China

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ABSTRACT

The concept of service learning for children has recently attracted more and more attention in China, and along with its incorporation into society, there are specific issues that should be considered. This chapter applies qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the current situation of children’s service learning in China in order to analyze the possibilities of community-based learning and to better understand its expectations. By utilizing these methods, the authors found the fragmented worlds of children in the case-study community, which can be regarded as a miniature representation of Chinese children’s service learning. Based on this study, the authors make further recommendations for future exploration in this domain.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that parents and teachers are the most important people for children’s development, and the collaboration among school, family, and community should provide the strongest support for students’ development. Research shows that students who receive support from family and school are more positive (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems& Holbein, 2005), are more likely to be academically successful (Sanders, 1996a), and children’s social, emotional, and behavioral development is better (Brandt, Glimpse, Fette, Lever, Cammack & Cox, 2014). Service learning exerts an important role on producing gains in personal, social, career, and academic learning. Research has proved service learning influences students’ sense of civic responsibility and reflects that a sequence of service-learning courses might maximize the potential of students’ civic responsibility and academic outcomes (Parker& Mabry, 1998). DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0871-7.ch012
Research has also found that students who participate in service activities become slightly more willing to participate in a public meeting or class, as the activities raise students’ assessments of the value of paying attention to politics and community responsibility for addressing problems (Hunter & Brisbin, 2000). Besides, many studies have found that service learning affects students’ academic performance, as well as their social and emotional development. The studies indicate that by participating in service learning, students learn about themselves, learn to make objective career decisions, interact with people they ordinarily would not encounter, care for others, and become better at making responsible decisions to solve problems (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Service learning can also reform curriculum and instruction. An example of this is in middle school, a service learning course can contribute to integrating theory and practice; at the same time, the relationships between service learning and students’ achievement of content standards make service learning an important link in the current educational reform movement (Schukar, 1997). The family-school partnership has attracted the attention of more scholars and educators, and it is generally agreed that family and school should work jointly for the development of children (Epstein, 2009).

Community is a foundational cell of society (Liu, 2007). People who live in a specific community are inevitably influenced by that community life (Dewey, 2001). There are traditional ideologies in Chinese culture that correlate with certain aspects of community life, such as interactions between humans and the environment, and combining education with life. With the introduction and development of its modern schooling system in the late 1970s, the traditional Chinese education system was antiquated and thus dissipated, and consequently, family and community life was excluded from formal education. This issue was a major focus by UNESCO in regards to the development of education throughout the world, as integrating family and community life was a major focus to ensure a balanced national curriculum (UNESCO, 1972). With the implementation of the one child policy in 1980s, and China’s rapid urbanization since the 1990s, educators and parents in China have highlighted community-based learning for children.

From the policy aspect, in recent years the Chinese government has issued a series of educational policies related to children’s community-based learning. For example, according to the Decision to Deepen Education Reform and Promote Quality Education (The CPC Central Committee and State Council, 1999), it is necessary for schools to establish a system for youth to engage in community service and community interaction. The trial implementation of the Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001) proposes that schools should make full use of resources in the local community, such as public parks and libraries, in order to facilitate student learning and provide hands-on educational opportunities. The National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010-2020 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2010) dictates using a combination of teaching with social practice in order to encourage students to take part in volunteer service and programs for the public good. Since its implementation, community engagement by students in large cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, have rapidly developed (Liu, 2010; Chen, 2013; Pan, 2010), and related institutions and organizations have been established, such as The Community Education Committee (Huang, 2005; Li, 2007).

However, some aspects are not functioning to their full capacity.

Firstly, the potential of children’s service learning has not reached its full potential in China, as many are under the impression that students do not have time to participate in non-academic related activities. It is commonly believed that children have enough time to participate in community activities during weekends and summer and winter holidays. However, many regard the academic expectations of stu-