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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON PARENTS' CHOICES APPLY ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF T SCHOOL IN BEIJING

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Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, education reform has been carried out all over the world. In one hand, the system of public school education cannot be recognized and satisfied by parents, and alternative education is one of the replacements. Through ethnographic research, the author participated in school activities, interview parents and micro-school APP interaction simultaneously, and use snowball sampling method to expand the depth and breadth of interviews. The purpose of this paper is to find out the differences between the school-running visions declared by schools verses the educational choices applied to parents. Try to classify what kind of parents will choose alternative education, and to reflect on the public education reform through their practices.

Keywords

Alternative Education; Educational Choices; Educational System

1. Introduction

Education is the art of pursuing changes. With the changes in the world trend, the goal is to pursue equality of educational opportunities and improve the quality of education. It aims to cultivate usefully, and happiness and enjoy a true, faithful and beautiful life. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the development of education has been insufficient to modern society and social needs. Information technology, lifestyle and learning methods have been quite different. Twenty years ago in mainland China, private schools, academies, and homeschooling came into being, and the existence of

these alternative schools is the practice of educational choices. Alternative education enables students and parents to have multiple choices and to receive an appropriate education. Many alternative schools are organized by parents with similar needs. Its significance to academia pose in alternative schools have their educational concepts, teaching materials, and teaching methods, and are more flexible than mainstream schools in terms of administrative organization and living standards. Many new educational concepts and practices can be applied quickly in alternative schools.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 What is Alternative Education?

Alternative education may be traced back to Greek philosophers such as Socrates, but the philosophy of modern alternative education can be inspired by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's theory of "three spiritual changes", the doctrine predicts the brilliant development of Western pedagogy in the 20th century. Camel represents traditional conservative pedagogy, the lion represents critical emancipatory pedagogy, and children represent alternative creative pedagogy. This may be a historical coincidence, but it can be predicted that in the 21st century, the latter two (critical liberation pedagogy, alternative, and creative pedagogy) will develop more vigorously in the advanced western society. Alternative education is a general term for describing educational or school programs that are different from traditional programs (Kapel, Gifford, & Kapel, 1991).

Alternative schools are defined as teaching methods, programs, activities and situations that are different from traditional public schools and can provide students or parents with various choices (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994). Alternative education is based on clear educational beliefs (student-centered, whole picture education, community autonomy, cooperative learning, etc.). It uses multiple educational options (enrich teaching content, multiple teaching methods, flexible and open teaching time and place, multiple evaluation methods) to reconnect uncertainties, to set free the child, self-fulfillment, and 'No Child Left Behind' (Hong Xiuying, 2008).

In terms of teaching methods, alternative schools are in the process of continuous change and development. With parents' and students' opinions constantly joined, new consensus must be constantly sought, which has the characteristics of "constructive" to reject the improper impact of achievement orientation and competitive pressure on education brought about by the existing society. Alternative schools are mostly private. Alternative school education is a pluralistic, comprehensive and flexible way of education. It can be taught according to the characteristics of students' learning. It is hoped that every student can get the best learning effect through the appropriate way of education, and then develop the possibility of an individual.

1.1.2 Specialties and Strength of Alternative Education

Alternative education offers students options other than mainstream schools. Taking Taiwan as an example, in the 'nine-year curriculum reform', the alternative schools have been consulted by the

government. Besides, alternative education may slowly become mainstream or large enough to stand side by side with mainstream schools, such as Waldorf Schools in Germany. In the concept of human rights in modern democratic countries, parents have the right to choose the education of their children, which is not limited by a single educational system. If parents are unwilling to accept any existing school education, home education is also an option. Although alternative schools have no clear and detailed learning policies and objectives, their common characteristics are as follows:

- Established with small and comfort classroom settings.
- Schools provide different courses for students to learn, even at certain times of the day, they choose the courses freely without compulsion.
- There is lively interaction in the classroom. The classroom is diversified, including period teaching, weekly planned teaching, free working hours, recitation, outdoor activities, personal work, ...etc.
- Combining learning content with experience, emphasizing that process is more important than the result. Experience-based learning can be explained from two aspects: one is to link up students' past experiences; the other is to let students get experience in operation.
- Emphasize comprehensive, networked learning, such as designing interdisciplinary program learning or developing social-emotional expression, art, music learning courses.
- Use alternative outcome measurement, such as learning portfolio instead of scores.

In addition to these common characteristics, each school has its educational philosophy and world outlook to follow, and some schools have changed or revised their original ideas in the process of school-running. Moreover, alternative schools have the function of stimulating and reflecting the mainstream education system, which can impact the rigid system, which enables children to develop freely and creatively.

1.1.3 The Realistic Picture of T School

In early 2016, a mother in order to solve the children's schooling problems, she tried to find one school from famous schools, international schools, public schools, private schools in Beijing, but she couldn't find an ideal school in her mind, a school that can respect the development of students, personalized the learning path...etc. What she wants was very simple, children's physical and mental health. But this seemingly simple goal is very difficult. She believes that cultivating a full-hearted child is to break the argument that success is to go to a famous school and earn a lot of money, because the real purpose of education is to let children know themselves and the world, that is, "learning knowledge, mastering methods, understanding the world; knowing who they are, what they can do, and exerting their greatest potential."

So she set up her school, which began in the 120 square meters of educational experimental field and carried out earth-shaking changes. She did not think it was a deviation but could draw on the

advantages of public schools and international schools to find a way for children. But the school has moved three times in just three years. The campus is getting bigger and bigger. There are 250 students from 31 to now. It has also begun to attract so many followers. It attracts teachers in the system to abandon their original stable jobs and admire their fame. Even parents from other cities are like Meng Mu's relocation.

In 2016, T School began to cooperate with Beijing's well-known and the only municipal key middle school in Chaoyang District, Beijing. A total of 31 school-founding families entered the school, continued to develop and set up an online parent school. In 2017, T School opened a branch school in Guangzhou. In 2018, due to the surge in the number of students, it moved to Jiangtai and cooperated with Finland signed the cooperation agreement to further open Sino-Finnish educational exchanges and teacher training, set up the Silicon Valley Branch in the United States, now they moved to the site of the old international school in Chaoyang District for the third time in 2019, after two moves, but the students' sense of security and intimacy with the school did not decrease but increased.

Through the timetable, we can know that students come to school before 8 o'clock to participate in the morning reading. Every day, they have at least two Chinese classes, one English class. In a week there would be six math classes, four physical education classes, one music class, two art classes, one class meeting, and one comprehensive class. Each class lasts 45 minutes, which is not far from the schedule of the general school. What's interesting is that there are two more Chinese, three English classes as PBL experimental project lesson, and two drama classes. There are seven classes in a day and in the afternoon there are two extra-curricular classes for children to choose from. There is academic extra-curricular knowledge as well as physical and artistic talent classes.

The IT team is the strong back up of the school. School base App allows teachers to upload teaching records every day, including titles, contents and teaching links, which makes parents feel comfortable and synchronize students' learning progress. Most of the students' evaluation is a portfolio. Each subject has different learning indicators and abilities to achieve, and conduct personalized report at the end of each term for each student. Besides, there are parent-school communities, which vigorously promote parents' education, let parents from anxious service purchasers to lifelong learning peers, and integrate social resources to apply on basis of education practice, the path of innovation.

2. Research Purpose and Questions

Due to the lack of legal basis, schools outside of the system are limited, might be terminated any time, school admins positioning confusion, violate of the laws. These problems have caused difficulties in operation and administration. The lack of supervision mechanism will also make it difficult for alternative schools to be managed clearly. Because of the diversity of types of alternative schools and the different purposes of various institutions, there are no clear rules to supervise the

implementation of education outside the system, resulting in the absence of evaluation mechanism to supervise the process and effectiveness of education outside the system. Most importantly, parents are most concerned about the lack of access to further education. Most of the out-of-system schools are concentrated in the pre-school and primary stages. Because of the complexity of the curriculum and the difficulties in running high schools in China, a student receiving alternative education cannot receive till university, if he returns to the system education halfway. It may be due to the lack of connection, resulting in students' maladjustment. In view of this, the Non-academic Education Regulations in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which rose in 1982, laid a good foundation for the National Plan for the Reform and Development of Long-term and Medium-term Education (2010-2020), issued from the beginning to 2010, to solve the bottleneck problem of the development of private education. By 2016, after the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress formally passed the amendment decision of the Law on Promoting Private Education, it provided a supervisory mechanism for parents' educational choices.

On the contrary, idealism is the opponent of realism. The more idealism there is the more perfect our society will be. The tolerance of society for idealism proves its maturity. It allows the existence of an idealist who aims to change the reality. This is another important meaning of idealism, that is, an indispensable factor to measure the maturity of a society. And for what purpose did these idealists come? Are they caring about education and the future of children? It's worth investigating.

From the perspective of Coleman's Rational Choice Theory, he believes that the task of sociology is to explain the social action system, that is, to explain social phenomena and analyze social facts, not just to explain individual psychological activities. However, to explain social phenomena, we need to rely on the interpretation of individual actions, that is, through the analysis of individual actions to explain "individual actions at the macro level and how these actions constitute macro-social phenomena". Based on this, this study, from the perspective of educational choice, takes parents and teachers of an alternative education school in Beijing as the research subject. Through observing the interaction between teachers and students, it explores the status of parents' educational choice and teaching scene. What are the reason and influence mechanism that parents choose this type of school? And try to understand this type of parents and teachers mentality.

2.1 The Core Value of Idealism

The educational values of idealism take the individual as the center, emphasizing that the direct purpose of education is to promote the free development of individual students in both human nature and rationality and try to cultivate the whole person. Starting from the ancient Greek school, many countries in the world pursue education independent of society and beyond social needs. This is not difficult to find in the views of outstanding educators in history. For example, naturalism, represented by Rousseau, emphasizes the development of human innate ability and gives people the most natural

education in the natural state. Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Herbart are all representatives who advocate the goal of human free development. Western humanism provides a philosophical basis for contemporary idealistic education.

The goal of idealism is to cultivate free-developing generalists, oppose imparting specific professional knowledge to students, and advocate a wide range of knowledge that promotes free development and sound personality. Idealism emphasizes the use of free methods and systems to enable students to receive education in a free state. Idealism education inevitably results in waste of short-term educational resources. Although education is a productive investment, not all knowledge and skills are equivalent to the definition of production. Idealism trains people according to people's needs rather than the needs of social politics, economy, and culture. When these people participate in social production, they must rebuild their knowledge system to meet the needs of society.



Figure 1: *The Core Value of T School*

2.2 The Implementation of the Study

Under the promotion of the national policy of opening up second births and the promotion of national academic qualifications, parents' educational qualifications are generally on the high level. Therefore, it is of great importance to analyze the requirements and practice of educational quality. Moreover, under the premise of traditional exam-oriented education, teachers' happiness index tends to decline, resulting in more teachers leaving, while parents' needs are on the low side. In the context of the rising voice of teachers seeking assistance, alternative education has its origin. According to the interview of 18,000 homeschooling parents conducted by the 21st Century Institute of Education in 2013, the results can be shown as the following figures:

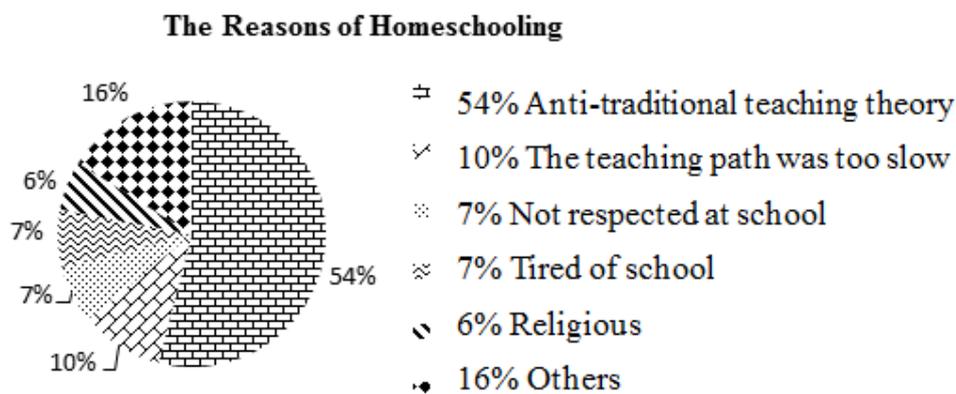


Figure 2: *The Reasons of Homeschooling*

It can be known that although homeschooling has not been formally incorporated into the law, it is no longer shocking or regarded as an alien phenomenon to go to school at home. More than half (54%) of mainland China parents choose home-based self-education because they oppose traditional school teaching concepts; 10% think that the progress of general courses is too slow; 7% think that their children are not fully respected; 7% think that their children are tired of traditional school life; 6% because of religious factors and 16% because of other factors. 62.01% of them had received traditional school education, and later left for homeschooling; 37.99% of them had been educated at home all the time. Based on theoretical discussion and the practical level of demand surge, this study intends to clarify the reasons for parents' school choice in alternative education and the mechanism affecting their choice through empirical research.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

This paper adopts ethnographic research and design. The purpose of this research is to have interaction and contact with subjects in natural situations through long-term fieldwork and researcher himself as a research tool. To obtain the context perspective of the insider and try to understand the parents' educational concepts and values. Parents' views and opinions on educational attitudes are major content. The author tries to form a rational analysis of their views through the data collected in the field survey, in-depth interviews and field logs.

In the process of investigation, the author adopts the interview method and field log. The interview is mainly a semi-open interview with interview topics. Snowball sampling is the basic method to select participants, and the number of participants is unlimited. It helps the author broaden his horizon and understand the relationship between teachers-students and parents-school comprehensively.

To gain trust, the researcher shows his identity at the beginning of the interview and informs the interviewees of his experience as a school supervisor. Parents feel comfortable and trust in the honest and open explanation. They also hope that they can get some knowledge and education methods from the researcher as feedback, so the interview went smoothly.

During interviews with parents, most of the interviews were recorded, but a few parents disagreed with the recording. Although the interviews involved were sometimes not within the scope, sincere communication and feelings are the processes of becoming an acquaintance.

In qualitative research, no "objective existence" can speak for itself. The reason why "objective existence" exists is that it has "significance" through the analysis and explanation of researchers (Denzin, 1994). The purpose of this study is to provide a clear description and description of how and why parents choose alternative schools and the factors.

3.2 Sampling

Since there are only about 250 students in the case school, through a school-wide questionnaire survey, we can get a preliminary understanding of the factors and methods of parents 'choosing school. The survey consists of students' learning situation, the recognition of the school and the degree of participation in school activities. Then we conduct a sample survey through the parents' volunteer team as the "village committee" of the school. The interview method is a semi-structured interview. During the interview process, random questions and exchanges are conducted according to the respondents' answers to collect more daily and authentic materials.

Firstly, after screening the groups, the big net approach, which benefits from participating observation, initially mixes with everyone and narrows the focus to a specific part of the research group, to micro-level. Participation in observation is not only to participate in the lives of the people studied, but also to maintain professional distance so that proper observation and data were collected. As in Powdermaker's 'Stranger and Friend' (1966) vividly describes the subtle relationship of the characters. In the early stage of fieldwork, we focused on the experience and events of school life to sort out the behavior pattern and logic, and then to better understand the group's cultural and systematic behavior, and then deduced the factors of parents' educational choice and the influence degree of family background.

3.3 Procedures

In the whole research process, the research mainly follows the steps of analyzing existing literature, forming a research framework, compiling measurement tools, implementing questionnaire survey and data analysis. After several on-site observations, the research conducted the focus dimensions. By exploring the literature of alternative school education and homeschooling, the researcher designed a parent questionnaire focusing on three major parts: basic information and family education, learning experience, family-school relationship. Later on, inviting school teachers and

parents to conduct case interviews simultaneously, the school offers the access to the school App; researchers can browse teachers' teaching records and parental teacher feedback in the system, and subsequent data collection. It can be used as a reference for analysis and research.

4. Findings

4.1 Questionnaire and Data Collection

The purpose of this study is to use basic questions to find out the way parents choose schools and their attitudes towards students' education; the questionnaire consists of daily life and learning routines, to facilitate more accurate questions in follow-up interviews.

This questionnaire is compiled according to the parental education choice orientation of this study. It is revised through the test questionnaire combined with literature. The collection method is pushed by App of T School. The response rate was not high, accounting for only 10% of the whole school. Follow-up efforts are made by parents to contact researchers independently, and then by snowballing in their respective class groups. At present, the response rate is up to 50%. This questionnaire has 19 questions, including three parts: basic information and family education for 6 questions, learning the practice, and experience for four questions, 15 sub-questions, 10 questions about family-school relationship, including two open questions - "the most important point for school" and "the suggestions for the school". It is a rare phenomenon that the answer rate reaches 100%, and the characters are up to 665 words. The average response time of a parent is 682 seconds (about 11 minutes), the longest time is 3,357 seconds (nearly 1 hour), the shortest time is 200 seconds (more than 3 minutes), and the average time is more than 600 seconds (10 minutes) accounting for 36%, which shows that parents are still effective in questionnaire collection.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

According to the valid questionnaire, 62.01% had traditional education experience, 37.99% had direct homeschooling, and 59.72% had other education experience and 40.28% had direct access to T school. It can be found that nearly 60% of people do not directly choose to flee or criticize formal school education, of which 55% are enrolled in public schools.

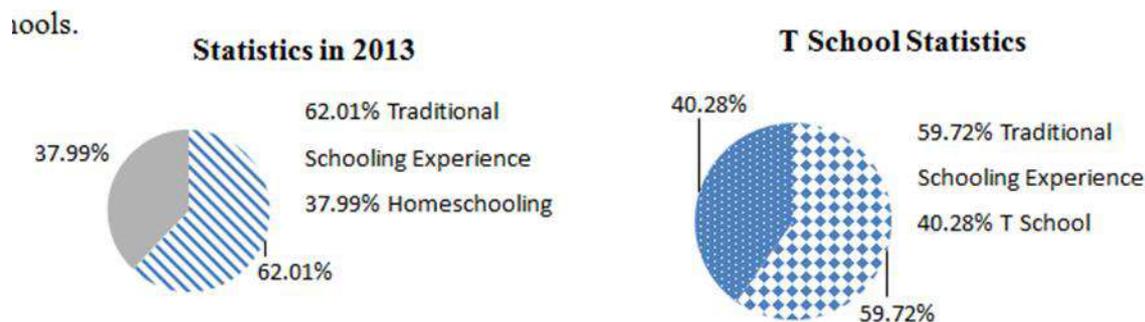


Figure 3: Home schooling participant past experience from 2013 national wide statistics and T school

According to the results of the questionnaire, the ways and strategies of parents' experience in choosing schools are as follows: educational philosophy (79.17%), teachers' quality (61.11%), personal evaluation (59.72%), introduction of relatives and friends (44.44%), small class (44.44%) and happy learning (36.11%), while less than 10% of the choices aimed teaching environment (8.33%), school novelty (8.33%), others (2.78%) and teacher recommendation (1.39%). Most parents have been evaluated by 3 to 5 schools before they enter T school. About 20% of them regard T School as their first choice

Although parents cannot fully reflect the school's philosophy and value through the school recruiting seminar. Most of the parents went through self-evaluation and visiting schools to choose the consistency of the school's teaching and concept through the change of students' behavior, attitude and thinking. The biggest change is that students enjoy going to school (65.28%), practice in thinking and asking questions (55.56%), being independent (37.5%), having a broaden outlook (37.5%) and presenting oneself (37.5%).

From the questionnaire, we can see that most parents think that after students study in T school, they have overall improvement in various ability indicators and core literacy, especially in self-awareness (80%), communication and cooperation (84.72%), learning to learn (84.72%), language expression ability (86.13%).

The core words of the last two open answer questions were: Firstly, children (students) which accumulate more than 35 times respectively. It can be explained that no matter how the school is changed or adjusted, parents care most about their children. Secondly, the school's core values (vision) for 48 times and the most repeated ones were ideas, respect, internal drive, happiness, inner fullness, and ability. The progress has to be improved is the stability of teaching methods and curriculum system, the improvement of logistics services (e.g. campus location, catering, hardware facilities of new campus), the improvement of English curriculum and the effectiveness of communication between home and school.

4.4 Interview Genus Analysis

Most of the parents contact the researchers by self-scanning after filling out the questionnaire. It can be inferred that they are a group of parents who are more willing to talk about their children's education and their own growth story. The schedule is relatively free. Initially, the time marked on the invitation is 40 minutes per person, but parents are very willing to share it. Currently, parents are willing to share it. The average interview time for each parent is about 80 minutes.

Through generic analysis, interviews can be divided into three parts: past experiences, educational concepts, and realistic choices; the corresponding attributes in past experiences are "perception of the system", "corporal punishment", "learning pressure", "parents' experience sharing", and "teachers' attention"; attributes in the educational vision "personality characteristics", "Ideas and

Literacy”, “Campus Atmosphere”, and “Teachers and Students Communication”, and “School administrators’ Positive Belief”; attributes, in reality, were “Graduation Connection”, and “Commuting Distance”.

From the interview content, we can try to classify parents into four types:

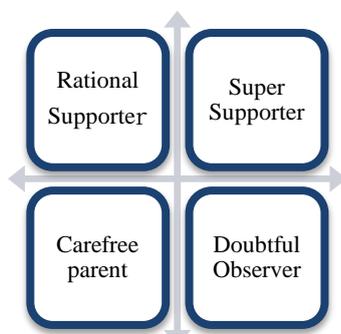


Figure 5: *Four Types of Parents*

The common characteristics of these families are at the upper and middle class of social and economic status, such as scientists, researcher, management, finance, lawyers, doctors, government personnel, teachers, and those who run their own companies. Most of the children are the only child. At present, the ratio of mothers interviewed is 80%. The main reason is that mothers take full care of the family and children's learning. Even working mothers are contractual cases or work at home. Even though students do little homework and do not attend tutorial classes, they are busy enough to study independently, such as reading, practicing, listening and accompanying. There is no transmission of educational concepts between grandparents and grandchildren. Four types of parents, respectively, are “super supporter”. These people do not have too many doubts about the school, but trust indeed. They also think that there are not too many differences in the curriculum. They should believe and cooperate because they should learn these things according to the current ability and acceptance of students. In order to digest, we should not take the amount of knowledge absorbed by students as all considerations, but also take an active part in the school events, family committees, PTA, as for a better understanding of the school; “Rational supporters” also take part in school affairs and devote themselves, once found out what they are not suitable for they would change to participate selectively, more focus on their abilities, pay more attention to their children, point out and offer suggestions to the school; “doubtful observers”, most of these people are new parents or transfer students, still adapting to the environment, learning from other parents, getting use to reduced homework, exams, and try to keep up the pace with others; “carefree parent”, this kind of parents are mostly for older children, have been fully familiar with the school environment and ecology, set free and grow naturally, let the child to take responsibility for their learning and development.

5. Summary

Chinese and Western cultures have different origins and different social qualities. The social structure of China is characterized by the "the Pattern of Difference Sequence" brought up by Mr. Fei Xiaotong, which is the lifestyle among groups and the organization of family ethics standard, and the thinking of relativism. Compared with the rationality and independence of the individual in the western society, China seems to have no individual in the western sense, such as "private" and would indicated as individuals with "group" or "circle" background. Individuals live in interpersonal relationships based on family relations. Therefore, the individual's behavior choice has the characteristics of ethics, relativity, and experience. This is called "ethical emotional choice", and it is considered as the traditional way of behavior choice in Chinese society. This is contrary to Coleman's principle of rationality and maximization of benefits, but it has maintained and developed the system and order of Chinese society.

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