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**Toward an Empowerment Model of Community Education in China**

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**Abstract**:

We define community education as organized lifelong learning through voluntary participation in collective efforts to critically address both individual and community needs. Community education has roots in European folk schools, United States participatory democracy, and Latin American “popular education.” Community education developed more recently in China in response to Learning Society and Lifelong Education policy. We present a new framework of community education that includes a theoretical component, emphasizing learning and participation principles. The organizational component includes traditional and nontraditional schools and other local organizations engaged in community education. The program component includes community service, empowerment, and combined models. We also apply the framework to an ecological-psychopolitical model of community education, which considers multilevel (individual, organizational, community/societal) processes of liberation or empowerment across four environmental domains or forms of capital: sociocultural, physical, economic and political. We conclude by examining two brief ethnographic case studies of community education in Shanghai, China.

**Keywords**: community education; popular education; adult education; adult learning; empowerment; citizen participation; social capital; China case studies

**Toward an Empowerment Model of Community Education in China**

**Introduction**

Despite many differences in the cultures and political systems of the United States (U.S.) and China, educators in both countries have shared pedagogical ideas at different times over the past century. For example, in the early 1900s, many Chinese academics became familiar with the educational philosophy of American Pragmatist John Dewey (1916). In the current era of globalization, international exchanges in both the academy and professional field of education have increased, with greater attention to the Deweyan concept of community education. It is therefore ironic that community educators and developers internationally may learn something from the Chinese about this originally Western idea. Our purpose is to develop a conceptual framework for community education based on empowerment and ecological principles and to briefly examine how two community organizations in Shanghai, China, reflect different parts of the model.

We define community education as *organized lifelong learning particularly by adults engaged in voluntary participation in collective efforts to address both individual and community needs* (Zhang, 2018, p. 10; Ng & Madyaningrum, 2014). While it has faded as a movement in the U.S. (for example, the *Community Education Journal[[1]](#footnote-1)* started in 1971 but folded in 2003), in China community education has grown in popularity as a term and practice since the 2000s. There have been 228 National Experimental Regions of Community Education and 122 National Demonstrative Regions of Community Education recognized by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China since 2001. Chinese community education researchers and practitioners have learned much from their U.S. counterparts and have many applications and observations to offer. In this article, we first define and provide a conceptual framework of community education (see Table 1). We then focus on the empowerment model of community education and conclude with a brief description and analysis of two case examples from China.

**Community education: A conceptual framework**

Different historical and cultural influences led to different understandings of the concept of community education. Its earliest roots can be found in the Northern European folk school movement starting in the 1800s, including the Swedish tradition of *Folkbildning*, meaning people’s learning and development (or “popular education”), focused on the relationship between lifelong learning, power and democracy in society (Laginder et al. 2013). Denmark developed similar folk schools.

The concept of community education took hold in the U.S. in the early 1900s. Its theoretical basis can be dated to Dewey’s (1916) educational philosophy, which emphasized the critical role of a well-educated and engaged populace for community development and the proper functioning of democratic forms of governance at all levels (Cremin 1990). Minzey and LeTarte (1972) identified the community school as the original site for delivery of community education programs addressing “the many problems of a community and ways of solving these problems through community action” (p. 11). For example, “community school” programs in the state of Michigan in the 1930s focused on reducing juvenile delinquency through expanded recreation opportunities and later widened to include adult recreation and other programs (Decker, 1999).

**Table 1. Comprehensive Community Education Framework**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theoretical component** | | |
| **Education and society** | **School and community** | **Learning and participation** |
| Interdependence of formal and informal education with society  Learning society | School-family-community partnership  Learning community | Lifelong learning  Citizen participation |
| **Organizational component** | | |
| **Traditional school based** | **Nontraditional school based** | **Non-school based** |
| Community schools  Community colleges  Universities | Folk schools  Community education centers | Community centers and other local government organizations (e.g., libraries)  Non-profit and voluntary organizations (e.g., arts, youth, religious)  Workplaces |
| **Program component** | | |
| **Service models** | **Combined models** | **Empowerment models** |
| Adult education;  Continuing education;  Lifelong learning;  Community services | Participatory action research;  Community service learning | Popular education;  Community and organizational capacity building;  Community-based education |

The concept re-emerged in Latin America in the 1960s as popular education, focusing more directly and critically on political consciousness-raising (Freire 1970). The grassroots Catholic movement of *liberation theology* used literacy classes to inform Brazilian peasants, with little to no formal education, how news events and the oppressed conditions they experienced were analyzed and linked to unjust laws, practices, and power relationships, which helped build an empowerment-based social movement (Freire 1970). Similar ideas and processes spread throughout Latin America and globally (Bowl & Tobias 2012).

In contrast, China adapted the U.S.’s Deweyan model of community education rather than the more overtly liberatory popular education model (Zhang, 2018). As we will show, however, a comprehensive empowerment-based model (Perkins, 2010; Christens & Perkins, 2008) can still be applied even in the Chinese context.

From a review of the literature, the concept of community education includes several components: (1) a theoretical component, i.e. community education is a series of foundational propositions and theories on the relationship between education and society, school and community, and learning and participation (Bowl & Tobias, 2012); (2) an organizational component, i.e. the above community education propositions and theories are applied through many different types of organizations, including not just local schools and other traditional educational institutions, but nonprofit “folk” schools for both adults and young people, public libraries, community centers, neighborhood voluntary associations, and other non-governmental community organizations and human services (Tett, 2010); (3) a program component, i.e. community education is a series of activities or processes-- for example, adult education, continuing education, lifelong education, community service-learning and community-based education, etc. (Zhang & Perkins, 2016; Minzey & LeTarte 1972; Wang 2004)-- conducted by the above organizations. According to this broader community education framework, both researchers and practitioners should adopt more flexible and comprehensive, transdisciplinary perspectives (see below), resources, educational approaches, and research methods to deal more collaboratively and effectively with shared, complex community problems.

Theoretical Component of Community Education

As a concept and philosophy, community education has its roots in Dewey’s educational theory promoting good citizenship (Dewey 1916). Dewey recognized individual-society and experience-education distinctions as dialectically false dichotomies, and aimed to synthesize and expand upon prior democratic educational philosophies by understanding learning as an inherently communal process. Dewey’s greatest contribution to the core principles of community education is that learning and teaching are most effectively accomplished through participation and sharing in an activity (Dewey 1916, 102). Learning is life-long and fostered by citizen participation in civic affairs and community service. Therefore, education is a kind of social life and what connects human capital with social capital (Bourdieu, 1985). There is no clear line dividing education and society. “The school must itself be a community life in all which that implies” (Dewey 1916, 222).

Dewey’s education theory is foundational for many theories about learning organizations, learning communities, learning society, and lifelong learning (Kilpatrick et al. 1999; Marsick et al. 2000). While Dewey’s education theory emphasizes the critical role of school-based learning by children to their participation in democratic society, theories of community education emphasize the more contemporaneous role of adult learning to the same societal goals. The theoretical component of community education connects formal learning in school with lifelong informal learning outside of schools.

Organizational Component of Community Education

The organizational model of community education began in 1934 when Frank Manley, a high school teacher in Flint, Michigan, received a $6,000 grant from the Mott Foundation to implement recreational programs to help youth avoid delinquent behavior and to provide self-help opportunities for people of all ages during the Great Depression. The schools utilized for this program were called “community schools” (Farley 2005). In the beginning, traditional public schools were believed to be the best centers for community education because they are centrally located within the community, have facilities adaptable to a variety of purposes, and are owned by the public (Farley 2005).

In the 1950s, the community school model was spread to all public schools in Flint and eventually served as a national example of how schools and communities could work together to solve community problems. For example, community education has been one of the three primary missions of community colleges. In 2001, the American Association of Community Colleges conducted a national survey to identify the scope of community-based programs in two-year colleges (Phinney et al. 2002). More than 82% of responding colleges identified community education programs and services as part of their mission. In addition, 66% sponsored community events, and 68% facilitated community meetings on local issues. This study also indicated that many colleges sought partnerships with local service organizations (35%), healthcare programs (34%), local businesses (33%), local governments (31%), and state governments (18%) in order to expand resources to better serve their broad constituency.

Besides traditional K-12 school systems, nontraditional schools and all kinds of other community organizations participate in community education. These include settings labeled “community education centers”, but more common venues are public libraries, museums, community centers, faith-based institutions, and other non-profit organizations. One of the most innovative nontraditional “folk” schools in the U.S. is Highlander Research and Education Center (www.highlandercenter.org) near Knoxville, Tennessee, created in 1932 as Highlander Folk School after its founder, Myles Horton, visited the Danish folk schools (Horton et al. 1990). Highlander is atypical of community education in the U.S. in its shared history and mission with Scandinavian folk schools (Laginder et al. 2013) and popular education (Freire 1970).

The community education networks extend to wherever they are needed. The diversity of community education organizations represents the multiple aspects of community development, including civic and political life, economic opportunity, social capital, and physical infrastructure. It also embodies the multiple aspects of individuals’ and family needs, including physical and mental health, housing and home improvement, food, art, music and other forms of cultural vitality, spiritual wellness, safety and security, recreation needs, and life skill demands, etc. Although the internet is increasingly a venue for both government and grassroots community development information sharing (Palmer & Perkins 2012), more U.S. learners pursue knowledge in physical settings than seek it online (Horrigan 2016). By an 81% to 52% margin, sampled adults were more likely to cite a locale such as a high school, place of worship, or library rather than the Internet as where their personal learning takes place. By a similar margin (75% to 55%), more vocational learners say their professional training occurred at a workplace than on the Internet (Horrigan 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic changed learning habits at least temporarily and maybe permanently, so local community organizations must adapt to such changes.

Program Component of Community Education

Program models for community education were diverse from the start. Decker (1999) summarizes the principles that guided the original Flint Community Schools Program:

(1) Community schools help people help themselves; (2) Community schools focus on prevention and education rather than charity; (3) Leadership development programs must provide encouragement to people who have ideas, initiative, creative ability, and the necessary “feel” or touch; (4) Wise administration combines sound business judgment with sound vision; (5) Start at home. After your neighbor has been cared for, give nationally and internationally based on a proven model of “helping people help themselves.” (Decker 1999, 7)

The types of community education programs that community colleges offer are adult education (e.g., to improve writing, reading or math skills), continuing (professional) education, lifelong learning (focused on specific nonprofessional needs or interests), community services (e.g., facilities sharing, arts and cultural events, community planning or other meetings, community health screenings, youth and community leadership training), and community-based education (encompassing civic engagement in all other community needs or issues, e.g., economic opportunities, environmental concerns, local culture and history, etc.; Wang 2004). The common characteristics of these community education programs include open access, multiple entry points in time and place, continuous or lifelong service to the learner, values and priorities based on the needs of the people, and flexibility to respond quickly to community needs (Miller et al. 2014; Wang 2004).

Besides all kinds of traditional education services, there are empowerment and comprehensive models of community education. Many countries have historically used education to promote equal opportunity and empowerment, especially to compensate for poverty and other disadvantages. Examples of the empowerment aim of community education include Freire’s (1970) theory and practice of popular education discussed above, grassroots community and organizational capacity building (Evans et al. 2015), and the sort of community-based adult education that is the focus of the folk school model (Laginder et al. 2013). There are also programs that combine both service and empowerment goals, such as participatory action research (Fine, 2017) and community service learning (Crabtree 1998).

**Empowerment and Community Education**

Empowerment has been a central theme in community psychology, social work, community development and all fields of community research and action (Perkins, 2010; Maton 2008). Critical pedagogies are not automatically empowering and when poorly planned, overly “academic” in language or focus, or implemented by educators lacking knowledge of students’ experience or insensitive to implicit power dynamics, they can be unintentionally disempowering (Ellsworth, 1989). Yet when applied carefully, empowerment emphasizes equal and valued partnerships, working closely and collaboratively, self-help, wellness, transforming and liberating one’s self, organization, and community toward competence, identifying and developing strengths (Perkins, 2010). Empowerment operates at multiple ecological levels: individual psychological empowerment is inextricably tied to the collective empowerment of groups, organizations, and whole communities (Perkins et al. 1996). Each level is mutually reinforcing, such that organizations cannot reach their full potential power without empowered individuals and work groups. Empowered communities depend on organizations with adequate capacity and power. And it is difficult for individuals to be empowered without group, organizational and community mediating structures to amplify their voice and clout.

Although empowerment is a collective, multi-level phenomenon, researchers often focus on the individual psychological level. Psychological empowerment can be defined as “the psychological aspects of process by which people gain greater control over their lives, participate in democratic decision-making, and develop critical awareness of their sociopolitical environments” (Christens 2012, 114). Scholars have distinguished different components of psychological empowerment, such as emotional (intrapersonal), cognitive (interactional), behavioral, and relational components (Christens 2012).

Learning, Participation and Empowerment

The key learning mechanism of empowerment is critical reflection (Mezirow, 1998) and the behavioral manifestation of empowerment is community participation. Researchers have studied various kinds of indicators, mediators and predictors of community participation and psychological empowerment (Perkins et al. 1996). Despite the extensive research on community participation and psychological empowerment, little research has specified the precise mechanisms of actualization of empowerment and how participation leads to it (Perkins, 2010). If discussed at all the relationship between them is often simply assumed or treated as a sort of automatic causality mechanism. It is surprising how many empowerment scholars elaborate theories of empowerment without clearly and specifically identifying the precise catalytic empowering processes, efforts and activities involved (cf. Maton, 2008; Perkins, 2010).

So there is a missing link between community participation and psychological empowerment. Our goal is to better understand the dynamic relationship between them, especially the cultivation of empowerment and the potential and actual role played by community education programs. Based on the theories of popular education (Freire 1970), the core of empowerment is learning (Perkins et al. 2007; Kieffer 1984; Maton 2008), and the ecology of empowerment is the ecology of learning through participation in organizations and community (Perkins et al. 1996). Critical learning practice has been applied with both youth and adults through popular education in community development work (Beck & Purcell 2010). Hence, there is a great opportunity for conceptual cross-fertilization between education and empowerment.

**An Empowerment Model of Community Education**

This study draws on community psychology, popular education, and learning sciences in adapting and proposing an empowerment model for community education. Based on a small-n study of emerging citizen leaders in grassroots organizations, Kieffer (1984) proposed a view of empowerment as a necessarily long-term process of adult leaning and development. In this perspective, empowerment is further described as the continuing construction of a multi-dimensional participatory competence. Perkins et al. (2007) described the relationship between empowerment and learning, and proposed a new three-dimensional model of levels and orders of change. They called for more attention to the concept of organizational learning and related ideas, such as situated learning and communities of practice. Furthermore, organizational learning is an important aspect of organizational empowerment and vice-versa (Perkins, 2010).

Based on well-established learning and human development theories, ecological perspectives emphasize environmental influences on developmental processes and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Because community problems are often complicated, effective interventions must consider the complexity of their ecological contexts. The conceptual framework behind the interventions should be multi-dimensional, multi-level, interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary. *Transdisciplinary* collaboration means researchers work jointly in bringing together their discipline-specific ideas to create new theories, concepts, or methods that transcend disciplinary differences to solve a shared problem (Perkins & Schensul, 2017).

We argue that the ecology of learning is analogous to the ecology of liberation or empowerment, adapting the comprehensive ecological model for community research and action by Christens and Perkins (2008; see Figure 1), which is also a guiding framework of our larger team project on the global development of 12 different applied community studies disciplines. The theme of the empowerment model of community education is how to develop an active role in the ongoing social construction of one’s environment. The consequence or stage of the development begins with a state of catalytic experience that may be seen by some as ignorance and by others as oppression. This occurs at multiple ecological levels (individual/micro, group/organizational/meso, community/societal/ macro; Bronfenbrenner 1979) and domains of environment or forms of capital (socio-cultural, political, economic, and physical; Bourdieu 1985), which interact and are transformed through processes of liberation, critical consciousness, and empowerment. For example, at the societal level of the political domain, policies favoring privatization of education may result in divided communities without improving private, traditional public, or charter schools. In response, the lifelong-learning perspective of community education suggests that at the organizational level, teachers’ unions have grown stronger and more active in many districts and community education offers adults an opportunity to (re)learn the problems and solutions of democracy, thereby empowering both teachers and learners at all three levels. The outcome is greater, more psychologically, politically and ecologically valid and empowered learning and knowledge at each contextual level and domain.

**Diagram

Description automatically generated**

**TWO CASE STUDIES IN SHANGHAI, CHINA**

Case Study Methods

We will use two examples from Shanghai, China, to illustrate the empowerment model of community education. Our research question is: How well do these community education exemplars reflect our Comprehensive Community Education Framework and Empowerment Model? Community education, as theorized and practiced in China, has its origins in Shanghai in the mid-1980s. There are 16 districts in Shanghai and all of them were recognized as National Experimental Regions of Community Education and 11 of them as National Demonstrative Regions of Community Education by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China from 2001 to 2016. Compared to the middle and western part of China, community education is highly developed in Shanghai. Community practitioners and researchers are always searching for new and innovative theories and practice from their counterparts in Shanghai. In recent years, the following programs became two of the most influential examples in Shanghai and had attracted attention of community practitioners and researchers from other parts of China.

The first author conducted both descriptive, ethnographic participant-observation case studies, spending 12 months collecting Case Study 1 data and eight months on Case Study 2. In Case Study 1, data were collected through field observations and 17 snowball-sampled small-group face-to-face interviews, and with the neighborhood committee Secretary and a local environmental protection organization leader. Respondents included two neighborhood committee members, 10 resident program participants, and five community-school teachers and principal. In Case Study 2, local administrative archives supplemented observations and 12 convenience-sampled face-to-face interviews, including the community-school principal, two teachers, and (in small groups) nine adult-learners attending weekly village meetings. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Some questions that were asked in the interviews included what changes the participants perceived after the programs were implemented, what predicaments they experienced, most memorable moments in their experiences with the programs, etc. Based on interviews with participants (community practitioners and residents) in the programs and observation of the social and physical environmental conditions, we report the main themes that emerged.

**Strengths and Limitations**

Space limits do not permit fully developed or thoroughly analyzed case studies or a large enough sample of community education programs to represent the countless examples found throughout China or even Shanghai. They were chosen as exemplars precisely because they have been successful and so illustrate what is possible to achieve in China. It is also clear that, as with any social intervention or policy in any country, the political situation and support for those programs could change. They are based primarily on a combination of the first author’s observations and interviews with participants as well as official documents provided by the participating organizations. We must emphasize that any of those sources likely contains some social desirability and other biases. But the present focus is not on the validity of any specific claims, but rather on describing the breadth of what each case is attempting to achieve and of some specific examples of programmatic activities.

A strength of this study is our diverse positionality and interdisciplinary collaboration. The first author is an adult community education expert based in Shanghai, but who spent a year in the U.S. studying community education models there. The second author is an American community psychologist and educator who has been a visiting professor and scholar not only in Shanghai, but also in Guangxi Autonomous Region and Nanjing. Thus, each author brings substantial familiarity with both countries, but widely varying training and experiences.

***Example 1: Ecological Community Building in Xuhui District***

Xuhui District, in central Shanghai, became a National Experimental Region of Community Education in 2003 and a National Demonstration Region in 2008. According to the neighborhood, subdistrict (street or town), and district system of administration, there are 12 streets and one town in the district. As one of the 12 subdistricts, Lingyunlu Street has 28 neighborhoods (or residential complexes). This case study describes a community education program operated in neighborhoods on Lingyunlu Street and provides a closer look at one of the most successful and influential leadership committees that help facilitate community education.

Ecological Community Building is one of the community education programs designed to promote residents’ cultural literacy and ecological awareness in the community development plan of Lingyunlu Street, thus illustrating how the program draws on multiple disciplines and serves not only individuals, but also community and organizational capacity building. Between 2011 and 2012, the city and the district funded the subdistrict to build “Low Carbon Innovation Houses” in community schools. These houses offer more than 10 energy-saving products and technologies including roof greening, rainwater recycling, solar panel storage, indoor natural ventilation design, etc. These spaces serve as educational places for residents to participate in ecological living, explore various innovative ways of preserving the environment, and learn different practices for creating an ecological community.

The Ecological Community Building program emphasizes citizen participation and school-community partnership theories of community education. The program has a committee, including representatives from, and collaboration between, community schools, various neighborhood committees, and community residents. The committee was named “Green Women” (GW) because most members are female. The first author had many opportunities to observe and participate in the programs and conducted interviews with core members of the GW. The program also involves usage of all kinds of environmental protection resources. The program collaborates with nonprofit environmental protection organizations, women’s organizations, and science education organizations, thus also illustrating the non-school-based organizational component of community education. Ecological and environmental protection resources are disseminated to residents and various education activities are hosted to encourage participation. The program builds an integrated learning process on ecological environmental protection issues. The integrated learning process includes gathering and disseminating sustainable environmental protection knowledge, cultivating environment-friendly behaviors and sharing and documenting related experiences, and participating in community engagement activities with neighborhood residents. Community leaders are provided with support activities and knowledge from the program, including curriculum building discussions, competence training, and learning to develop leadership skills in facilitating the program.

Among those who have taken on leadership positions in the community is the GW committee (GWC), which evolved from the GW working group that was formed during the implementation of the Ecological Community Building program. Following the lead of the neighborhood committee, a political group of government officers who hold administrative functions in the community, several housewives in the neighborhood voluntarily formed a women-led working group. The group considered promoting low-carbon environmental protection activities as an entry point, and gradually extended their voices to community public affairs governance. Through their outreach efforts, the GW working group brought increased participation of community members in the community environmental protection education programs. And due to their success in promoting participation in the programs, the working group took on the status of the GWC.

Since 2011, the GW have provided workshops showing community residents how to recycle waste and turn it into something useful. For example, they taught community members how to use plastic particles taken from garbage decomposition to build cabinets and how to make shopping baskets out of milk packages. In carrying out new Regulations on the Management of Domestic Waste in Shanghai, the GWC has also played an important and influential role in a series of waste sorting science popularization activities. They organized vivid environmental protection lectures for young people in the community to explain the importance and necessity of garbage classification in detail and helped teenagers further consolidate their knowledge of garbage sorting through games. Furthermore, they committed to the development of residents’ ecological behavioral habits and promoted the information about how to conduct waste sorting and recycling at home and abroad.

With help from the GWC, the community education program spreads the “asset-based community development” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) idea that garbage is a misplaced resource that can be used in other ways. Since the program began in 2011, the amount of recycling material collected has more than doubled. Moreover, these steps to improve the physical environment also improve the social environment by facilitating relationships between residents.

This example has been one of the best practices of community education in Shanghai. Before the community intervention, Lingyun Street neighbourhoods were polluted; since the community education campaign, one of those neighborhoods won a “Low Carbon Demonstration Community” title. Interviewed community members reported the effectiveness of the community meeting among tenant representatives and committee members. One participant commented:

“They recorded all the problems we reported, such as people need to clean after their dogs, or someone needs to prune the tree in front of Building 12. And after the meeting they will actually take actions to solve those problems. The importance of the community (education) program is fixing community problems. They might be trivial, but they did impact the quality of life of every person living here. Also, having this kind of effective program really pulls us together. Now, we know everyone in the community through different activities and we work together to grow greens and make our environment a better place.”

In our empowerment model of community education this program involves political, economic, and sociocultural issues, but focuses mainly on the physical environmental domain. It includes the macro-societal level of public policy, the community level, the meso-organizational level, and the micro-system and individual levels. The process of empowerment is embedded in the integrated learning cycle, including knowledge retrieval and dissemination, taking action and sharing experience, and building community connections and programs. GWC members routinely gather resident opinions, then take collective action with them to address the problems identified, thus promoting neighboring, sense of community, collective efficacy, and control over community affairs. One participant said: “We come to GWC whenever we have an emergency, problems or suggestions.”

This community education program also clearly reflects the theoretical, organizational, and program components throughout the whole process. The use of community education to promote social policies such as environmental protection and garbage classification relies on the theoretical relationship between education and society, school and community, and learning and participation. Moreover, local community schools and the “Ecological Community Building” and GWCs all represent the organizational component of community education. Lastly, such community education includes a series of programmatic activities such as the environmental protection lectures and waste sorting activities that provide community members with the service-learning opportunities and knowledge they need to enhance their quality of community life. The outcome of this community education intervention improves not only the physical environment of the community but also the social quality of life for residents, who have formed a learning community that has strengthened community social cohesion.

***Example 2: Villagers' Weekly Meeting in Maqiao Town, Minhang District***

The Minhang District is a suburb of Shanghai. It became a National Experimental Region of Community Education in 2009 and a National Demonstrative Region in 2014. According to the district’s administrative system, there are four residential subdistricts, nine towns and one industrial subdistrict. Maqiao town, one of the nine towns, has 17 neighborhoods, all but one of which are administrative villages.

Maqiao Town is located in the intersection of urban and rural areas. The catalytic experience in this case is a variety of social conflicts after relocation. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the urbanization process of Maqiao has been accelerating. The trends of people’s relocation to urban homes and the expansion of the city have resulted in a rapid population increase in Maqiao Town, which in turn caused a significant transformation in the local economy. While the town’s residents adapted to these changes, many social problems occurred. As the villagers moved into tall, high-density apartment buildings from their scattered houses, they lost their lands and traditional lifestyles. How to support their lives and adapt to the new situation are the most important issues. The conflicts arose from poor communication between the villagers and the local government, a lack of information and subsequent confusion, and an inability for new residents initially to have a voice or active role in the community.

In response to these problems, the town governing committee investigated and found that a source of the problems was insufficient communication between residents and committee officers. The idea of a villagers’ weekly meeting was put into practice in one of the villages in Maqiao Town before expanding to other villages. The aim of the villagers’ weekly meeting is to promote social governance through community education, innovate democratic practice, empower and strengthen grassroots supervision of local government, and address social problems such as relocating and providing legal residency status for land-expropriated farmers. That created a new platform of community education to deal with those issues since 2009 in Maqiao Town.

Villagers’ weekly meeting started with a collaboration with a distance educational television program created by Shanghai Open University. The meeting is televised weekly and villagers can view the show from 22 viewing stations built in the 17 villages in Maqiao Town. At the beginning of each meeting, one member of each village committee introduces the current situation of the village and records new problems from the community members. After the problems are collected every Tuesday, the leaders try to address them immediately. If they are not able to solve them, they report to the higher authorities and give feedback to community members in the next Tuesday meeting. Due to the direct dialogue with their community leaders, there is increasing enthusiasm of the people in participating in discussing community affairs and reporting problems that occur to them. Ages of participants range from very young to very old. The Town committee also emphasizes the villagers’ weekly meetings as components of evaluation for the community leaders.

In the second part of the meeting, the community educators, who are either selected by community members due to their popularity and prestige or appointed by the town committee, give lectures and presentations to educate people about new government policies and their impacts on participants’ communities. Moreover, the educators undergo regular training programs from local community schools to improve their presentation skills and receive support in the form of resources on the topics that they plan to discuss every week. And because of the vivid and interactive presentations, potentially divisive political, social and governance topics are delivered and discussed in a more relaxed, informative learning atmosphere than was the case before the community education approach was adopted.

The third part of the meeting involves the village representatives and the community leaders reporting the progress of their work. Finally, the participants are free to watch science and health programs tailored to their personal needs and interests.

According to the town records, Maqiao Town documented 548 problems in the villagers’ weekly meetings and solved 539 of them in 2013, a success rate of 98.4%. With the establishment and development of the villagers’ weekly meeting, community members now make demands with open communication and democratic and autonomous management. One resident said: “Community leaders…do tackle problems based on the opinions of residents.” One problem discussed in an interview was how residents appealed for a new pedestrian crosswalk at a dangerous intersection, which involved communication with several governmental offices across different management departments. The villagers worked closely with each other and government staff to examine road conditions and design and build a safe and effective crosswalk. The number of meeting participants has increased as well, from 500 to nearly 3,000 in less than 10 years, while the population of Maqiao Town has remained stable.

The community education intervention builds and supports collaboration among the local administrative system, community schools, and local residents, again demonstrating theories of citizen participation, school-community partnership, and learning communities. It also reflects elements of all three empowerment models of programming: community and organizational capacity building, community-based education, and popular education (high learner participation, albeit without much critical consciousness-raising). The intervention responds to problems identified at the individual, organizational, and community levels by creating new participatory and learning structures at the organizational level and encouraging more civic participation on the community level to improve mutual learning and problem-solving at all three levels. The environmental domains or forms of capital involved include the political, economic, and socio-cultural. Through participation in the villagers’ weekly meeting, members are able to achieve more political involvement in the first and third parts of the meeting, receive formal education on government policies and discuss the influences on their lives in the second part of the meeting, and gain non-formal science and health knowledge that will facilitate their learning and living in the last part of the meeting. The intervention not only provides community members with general education services, but also elicits genuine participation in decision-making, management, and supervision of various social affairs. Through such participation, community members learn about democratic processes (at least at this most grassroots level), build their democratic consciousness, and develop habits of democratic problem-solving, as theorized by Dewey (1916).

Besides such internal influence, this community education intervention is also successful in solving most of the identified community problems. The first author observed a weekly meeting and communicated with participants and community educators several times. The on-site responses of the participants were very positive. As a result of its community governance achievements and impacts, the weekly meeting has come to be regarded as one of the best community education practices in Shanghai. This positive assessment is based on the first author’s honest impressions of this case, but the community was not educated to critically question the underlying problem that residents were forced to relocate due to rapid urbanization and lost their land and way of life.

**DISCUSSION**

**Theoretical and Practical Implications of Community Education**

Based on the proposed conceptual framework and empowerment model of community education, as well as the two brief case studies, what follows are key reflections about community education interventions in China and how they compare with historical and current ones in the U.S. and elsewhere.

***Connecting the diverse organizations of community education***

Cremin (1990) identified “three abiding characteristics of American education—first, *popularization*, the tendency to make education widely available in forms that are increasingly accessible to diverse peoples; second, *multitudinousness*, the proliferation and multiplication of institutions to provide that wide availability and that increasing accessibility; and third, *politicization*, the effort to solve certain social problems indirectly through education instead of directly through politics” (Cremin 1990, vii-viii). Yet Cremin had earlier identified structural impediments to publicly supported, lifelong community education-- such as siloing of the institutions (e.g., schools, libraries, community centers, media, etc.) needed to fund, plan and implement community education into separate systems and sectors (Cremin 1977). Those observations of an uncoordinated non-system of community education in the U.S. remain valid and, along with neoliberal public budget reductions, help explain the scattered and unsteady progress in many Western countries.

By contrast, China has experienced much more concerted development of community education over the past 30 years. It has done so not only more comprehensively across different levels of neighborhood, city, provincial, and central governments, but across the organizational and institutional sectors, including both traditional and nontraditional schools and other community organizations identified in our Comprehensive Community Education Framework (Table 1). China’s experience has also helped advance theories of community education in terms of its broader role in education and society, its relationships to both public education and the community, and its simultaneous focus on learning and participation. This assessment of Chinese community education also supports the program component of our framework by including China’s relatively new, but expanding service models, an empowerment model “with Chinese characteristics” (i.e., more circumscribed and individualized in process but collective and community-wide in outcomes), and models that combine both service and empowerment.

***Promoting an ecological perspective and active participation in community education***

Community education programs increasingly emphasize an ecological conception of learning that reflects our Empowerment Model of Community Education (Figure 1). In that model, ideally learning is not an isolated individual activity, but an active, liberatory and empowering process occurring at multiple levels from individuals and their immediate microsystems of family, friends and workgroups to organizational, community and societal levels. Community education is also ecological in attending to multiple domains of the environment, disciplines, and forms of capital (Bourdieu 1985): the sociocultural, political, economic as well as physical-spatial context of learning. Therefore, community education is not only a process of providing education or improving local services, but also a process of increasing civic participation among individuals, organizations, and communities, and helping them move at each level from a state of relative powerlessness and apathy toward greater efficacy, liberation, knowledge and social, political and other forms of capital (Tett, 2010).

***Increasing sensitivity to cultural and political differences***

Community education addresses not only “educational” issues, but also community development issues of all kinds and in all sectors of society. Meanwhile, empowerment is not only about individual self-efficacy, but also collective efficacy to address structural and systemic issues. In practice, however, the empowerment model of community education in China, the U.S., or any country must consider both local and national cultural and political differences in terms of what specifically is possible using what methods and in what timeframe. The exchange of community education theories and practices between the two countries has been invaluable to this study, but the framework and model will necessarily vary by community and societal context. Generally speaking, active community participation has become a tradition in U.S. while it is still new and more limited in China. The power of the state in China is not only an important source of support for community education but also a threat to control it or withdrawing funding (Bowl & Tobias 2012). Yet despite those limitations and caveats, the rapid growth of community education in China is a hopeful sign that leaders there understand that increasing lifelong learning and local problem-solving may be a key to dynamic social improvements as well as ultimately a more stable and successful society.

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1. Not to be confused with the new Indonesian journal by that name started in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)