

Thousand Trees



Social Problems

Among the most serious of China's present social inequalities which have substantial long-term effects is the issue of education inequality. High-quality education resources are enjoyed by high-income families, but cannot be afforded by medium and low-income families. Inequality is particularly serious and obvious in early and pre-school education, as they are not covered by compulsory education. The gap in education quality between kindergartens in rural areas and those in urban areas has not only directly affected the development of children in rural areas, but has also impacted the improvement in the education level of the children's families and the local population.

In order to solve this problem, from 2011 to June 2013, the Central Government spent a total of RMB 34.1 billion to support the development of pre-school education. Meanwhile, with the goal of promoting the development of pre-school education in mid and western regions, the three year pre-school education action plans formulated by the central and local governments have focused on supporting the construction of central township kindergartens in those regions.

With the gradual implementation of the policies, parents now find it much easier to get their children into kindergartens, and some rural kindergartens already enjoy better school campus conditions than many urban kindergartens. But at the same time the

problem of the quality of pre-school education in rural areas (which is, in particular, embodied by the lack of qualified teachers and the lack of teaching plans suitable for children in rural areas) is attracting much attention.

Origin

In October 2011, after nearly two years of preparation, Beijing Leping Welfare Foundation and some social entrepreneurs such as Wang Gan established the Thousand Trees Equal Education Partners (“Thousand Trees”) with a registered capital of RMB 2 million. As a social enterprise focusing on the development of equal children’s education, Thousand Trees aims to improve the quality of pre-school education of “left-behind children” in rural areas and migrant children in cities, as well as promoting the development of equal education.

From the outset, Thousand Trees has always done its best to provide high-quality education for the children of medium and low-income families and to promote the development of equal education, and has conducted multi-faceted research towards reaching this goal.

During its initial stages, Thousand Trees tried to find professional solutions for the fundamental problems in rural infant education, course quality and teachers, developing a set of courses suitable for rural kindergartens and providing systematic teacher training based on the courses so as to help build up local training forces and teams of pre-school teachers in rural areas.

Meanwhile, in 2011 Thousand Trees established a kindergarten for migrant children called “Thousand Trees Children’s Home” in Guo Village, Yujiawu Township, Tongzhou District, Beijing. All the children at the kindergarten come from families of local peasants or migrant workers. The Children’s Home is an experimental kindergarten and training centre, where training, course tests and demonstrations are held by Thousand Trees. The Children’s Home places emphasis on activities appropriate for the children’s age, strengthening the children’s learning enthusiasm, encouraging them to feel, participate, explore and express themselves. After sending their children to Thousand Trees Children Centre, a lot of parents reflected that their children have become happier, more confident and are more willing to communicate with others.

In 2012, Thousand Trees began its partnership with Beijing Western Sunshine Rural Development Foundation to provide training for the teachers of 10 Sunshine kindergartens in Dangchang County. The teaching materials used in the training were developed by Thousand Trees, the contents of which include “Orff music”, “shared book reading”, “path to math”, and “playgroup”. From 2013 on, Thousand Trees began its cooperation with local education bureaus in Hubei Province to offer training to the teachers of 35 township centre kindergartens.



Solutions/Business Models

After two years' practice, Thousand Trees gradually found that its strength lay in developing teaching materials suitable for children in rural areas and offering systematic training. Thus, the management team adjusted its business focus and divided it into three parts: 1) Providing suitable activities for children in rural areas; 2) offering effective and sustainable teacher training for frontline teachers in rural areas; and 3) providing parents of children in rural areas with suitable education services.

1. Providing suitable activities for children in rural areas

Based on the actual situation in rural kindergartens, Thousand Trees has developed a set of courses suited to the children's needs. The reading based courses enable children to learn through listening, reading and speaking. The teacher may help children to better understand the courses with expressions and actions based on the teaching material. Meanwhile, Thousand Trees has also prepared music teaching materials for children, recommending that 15 minutes of music activities should be arranged for children on a daily basis whenever and wherever possible.

2. Offering effective and suitable teacher training for frontline teachers in rural areas

During its initial stages, Thousand Trees provided training directly to the teachers of rural kindergartens. However, it soon found that intensive, large-scale, short-term training sessions could not achieve satisfactory results, and that what frontline teachers need is continuous guidance. Meanwhile, it also found that in order to improve the education quality of rural kindergartens in the most effective way (achieving maximum output at the least cost), attention should be paid to central kindergartens in townships as the main providers of pre-school education in rural areas.

As a result, Thousand Trees adjusted its own strategy to cooperate with local education bureaus, offering training for the teaching fellows and trainers selected by the education bureaus who would then offer continuous guidance for frontline teachers at central kindergartens in townships. Thousand Trees call this the “three-tier training model”.

The courses developed by Thousand Trees have key advantages (being based on advanced child development theories and teaching methods), are developed according to actual practice (all the course activities have been applied in their own kindergartens), and can be readily applied to the situations of the rural kindergartens (low teacher-pupil ratio and a lack of teaching aids). Built around the actual situations of rural pre-school teachers, the courses place emphasis on stimulating trainees’ confidence and enthusiasm, and the trainers are often frontline teachers themselves. Therefore, it is especially popular among rural teachers.

3. Providing suitable educational services for parents of children in rural areas

Thousand Trees has its own website, which it has positioned as a non-profit internet platform offering pre-school education services, designed to provide free and professional pre-school education services for even more people in need. The training content that has been uploaded onto the website includes demonstration video and audio materials such as “listening and reading”, “children’s songs”, and “music activities”, and reading guidance such as “listening and reading” and “picture book reading”. Through these videos and reading guidance, parents in rural areas will have their children engaged in reading, games of children’s songs and music activities both at home and in the community.

In August 2014, the mobile phone app developed by Thousand Trees, “Stories of Thousand Trees”, officially went online, making it convenient for parents to recommend the most suitable stories for their children.



Social Impact

Through partnerships with local governments and non-profit organisations, Thousand Trees has established pilot kindergartens in Gansu, Hubei and Sichuan. About 45 kindergartens are offering courses developed by Thousand Trees alone. While setting up pilot kindergartens, Thousand Trees also joined hands with local governments, made use of local resources, trained teams of local trainers, established a backbone of teams of rural teachers and conducted effective exploration on how to deliver courses and teacher training on a large scale at a low cost.

By the end of 2013, Thousand Trees had trained a total of 1,152 teachers and 213 parents, covering 417 rural, migrant, and grassroots kindergartens, benefiting 50,528 children.

In addition, by developing courses which are applicable in rural kindergartens and delivering systematic teacher training, Thousand Trees has continued to strive to establish a non-profit early childhood education network. It has also created a three-tier training model through its Children's Homes which may serve as a model for the government in the development of inclusive pre-school education.



Challenge: How to Expand Social Impact

Since its establishment as a social enterprise, Thousand Trees has not limited itself to solving the problems of individuals. Instead, through popularising innovative solutions, facilitating the development of the industry and enabling policy changes, it wishes to provide equal opportunities for as many children as possible to have access to high-quality and affordable pre-school education, which in turn will exert an expanded social impact.

With this vision in mind, Thousand Trees has continued to work hard to find effective ways to expand its social impact. In 2012, it benefitted 9,571 children by providing direct training for the teachers of 126 rural, migrant children and grassroots

kindergartens. In 2013, it benefitted 42,000 children through its three-tier training model and offered training for 1,152 teachers of 417 rural kindergartens.

Meanwhile, recent statistical data indicates that there are nearly 50 million children that attend village township kindergartens, most of which are receiving education similar to pupils of primary schools. Thousand Trees still has a long way to go to expand its social impact. Therefore, it decided in 2014 to attain this goal through providing online and offline education products and services. Apart from the internet, Thousand Trees will also mobilise local resources and work closely with local governments to conduct pilot projects in township central kindergartens, popularising the pilot projects first in the county and then the entire province. In the future, these programmes will be gradually incorporated into provincial or national on-the-job training programmes aimed at the teachers of township central kindergartens. Financial sustainability will be achieved through the purchase of services by the government. As for online products, Thousand Trees wishes to provide parents, children and teachers with internet education products through websites and mobile apps.

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