

Can a Non-Core Subject Teacher Serve As a Homeroom Teacher? Discussion on the Dispute between Core and Non-Core Subject Teacher as Homeroom Teacher

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Abstract: *In elementary and middle schools in China, core subject teachers serve as homeroom teachers in most classes. Nevertheless, some schools are beginning to try to use non-core subject teachers as homeroom teachers. A series of disputes have arisen over the non-core subject teacher serving as the homeroom teacher. Based on defining the concepts of the core subject, non-core subject, and homeroom teacher, this paper summarized the two viewpoints of whether core and non-core subject teachers can become homeroom teachers; and then discussed the role and the potential reasons of the non-core subject teacher as the homeroom teacher for being blocked, and some solutions are proposed. It is hoped to inject new vitality into the position of homeroom teacher by discussing this phenomenon.*

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AS the class organizer, educator, and guide, the homeroom teacher (Ban Zhu Ren in Chinese) is an essential source of influence for students and plays the instructor's role in students' healthy growth. Therefore, from the perspective of student development, homeroom teacher choice is crucial for student development. In the United States, this role is often referred to as "counselor" or "advisor." Counselors are usually held by professional personnel and are responsible for students' psychological guidance and academic guidance to a certain extent, including course selection and further studies (Brott & Myers, 1999). There is also an assistant homeroom teacher in Japanese middle schools and the homeroom teacher to help the homeroom teacher manage the class. Most of these assistant homeroom teachers are non-core subject teachers. In Germany, in addition to part-time teachers, another full-time staff has the opportunity to serve as homeroom teachers. There are no special requirements in terms of age, subjects, etc. The role of homeroom teacher is also the most anticipated position for all German teachers.

Affected by the former Soviet Union's education, China has generally established a homeroom teacher position in primary education. In-service teachers usually perform this role. In addition to their regular teaching work, they are also fully responsible for the thinking, study, health, and life of a class of students. Affected by Chinese subject teaching, teachers are also divided into core subject teachers and non-core subject teachers. In the choice of homeroom teachers, subject teachers represented by language, mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, etc., have a more significant proportion of homeroom teachers, while non-core subject teachers such as music, sports, and art rarely serve as homeroom teachers.

With the advancement of school education reform, the position of homeroom teacher has been given more meaning. Some schools in China have made new attempts. In a middle school in Nanjing, Jiangsu of China, since 2000, it has tried to use P.E. teachers as homeroom teachers. A total of 5 of the school's eight physical education teachers were awarded the homeroom teacher's title. Moreover, some of them also held the teaching and research group leader, grade group leader, and moral education director. A middle school in Qingdao City, Shandong Province, China, also made a bold attempt to make physical education teachers homeroom teachers. As a result, it was questioned and complained about by the parents of the students. These "subversion" behaviors that make non-core subject teachers take on the responsibility of class management and make core subject teachers "retreat to the second line" have debated whether non-core subject teachers are capable of homeroom teachers (Wang & Wang, 2020).



Based on this, this paper attempts to analyze this controversy and gives its own opinions. Because there were few related types of research on homeroom teacher role selection, and most of the currently limited studies were just the summary and feelings of Chinese teachers' work experience based on their cases. Therefore, there was a lack of evidence and material support at home and abroad. Therefore, this paper attempts to start from the connotation of the homeroom teacher's function, and based on clarifying the conditions that an excellent homeroom teacher needs to have and finds out the reasons why non-core subject teachers serve as homeroom teachers in primary education in China and provide with the corresponding strategy.

Definition and Connotation of Related Concepts

Definition of Core Subject and Non-Core Subject

Core subject and non-core subject are two related concepts based on Chinese curriculum teaching. Although there is no distinction between core subject and non-core subject in the curriculum standards officially issued by the education department, there is no definition of the concept of the non-core subject. However, in the actual field of primary education, the existence of the concept of a non-core subject is an indisputable fact. Usually, Chinese, mathematics, and English are core subjects, and courses other than these three core subjects are collectively called non-core subjects (Zhang, 2010). However, with the Chinese education curriculum reform, core and non-core subjects' meaning has also changed. Some scholars believe that the courses that need to be assessed in the entrance examination are core subjects, and the courses that have nothing to do with the entrance examination are non-core subjects (Zhang, 2014). Combining these two points, this paper defines core subjects as subjects included in the entrance examination, represented by Chinese, mathematics, and English, while non-core subjects are subjects not included in the entrance examination, represented by music, sports, and arts.

Definition and Connotation of Homeroom Teacher

From Chinese education development, the formal establishment of the "homeroom teacher" position in the modern sense was in 1942. The Education Section of the Sui De Special Administration defined the position of "homeroom teacher" in the "*Elementary School Training Guidelines*" as to implement the integrated teaching system; the responsibility of the homeroom teacher must be strengthened." After 1949, China set up an elementary and middle school as a tutor and later abolished it and changed it to a homeroom teacher. Since then, the title of homeroom teacher has been used today (Fu, 2012).

In 2009, the task of homeroom teacher was clearly defined in the "*Interim Regulations on the Work of Elementary and Middle School Homeroom Teacher*"¹ issued by the Ministry of Education. The homeroom teacher's primary tasks are: to carry out

classwork by the requirements of comprehensive development of morality, intelligence, physical and beauty; comprehensively educate, manage and guide students; make them ideal, ethical, educated, disciplined, and physically and mentally healthy citizen. Since then, his work's content has also evolved several times with education and society. Overall, this determines the three aspects of a homeroom teacher, including organizing and managing classes, education, and guidance for students' overall development, coordinating all aspects of education, and communicating through various channels. Therefore, this paper defines a homeroom teacher as a coordinator of subject teaching, a fully responsible person for students' thinking, learning, health, and life, and is a class organizer, leader, and educator.

The Controversy about Core and Non-Core Subject Teacher Serving as Homeroom Teacher

Viewpoint 1: The Core Subject Teacher is More Suitable to be a Homeroom Teacher

Except for a school in Qingdao, Shandong Province in the above case, most schools in China have this phenomenon. That is to say, a core subject teacher is more suitable to be a homeroom teacher. According to Gao (2012), all homeroom teachers of an elementary school in Zhengzhou are core subject teachers among the randomly surveyed schools. Among the homeroom teachers, 80% are Chinese teachers, and 20% are mathematics or English teacher.

Parents generally believe that the core subject teacher has more contact with students and can have more opportunities to understand their children. Simultaneously, the core subject teacher as a homeroom teacher can urge children to learn core subject well, which is conducive to improving students' academic performance. In contrast, non-core subject teachers generally teach multiple classes, and each class has a small number of class hours per week and may also bring various interest groups or guide extracurricular activities. Therefore, the students' contact time in this class is relatively limited, and it is impossible to track the students' learning status in real-time (Zhou, 2010).

Also, Zhang (2013) pointed out that whether a homeroom teacher can become a "model of knowledge" in students' minds that is worth learning by them has become an essential factor in determining a homeroom teacher's success. Core subject teachers are generally teachers with more teaching achievements and the right to speak professionally. This type of teacher can first satisfy the students' desire for knowledge, thereby establishing the teacher's position of knowledge authority in the students' hearts and enabling students to accept the management of themselves as a homeroom teacher. However, due to differences in time, homework, and academic performance, non-core subject teachers lack contact time with students and lack knowledge authority. Students tend to "despise" non-core subjects psychologically, regard non-core subject classes as

relaxing time, and even disrespect non-core subject teachers as homeroom teachers; their teachings of non-core subject teachers are also ignored. It creates numerous obstacles to the class management of non-core subject teachers.

Viewpoint 2: Non-Core Subject Teacher is More Suitable to be a Homeroom Teacher

Some scholars believe that compared with core subject teachers, non-core subject teachers often do not have too much mental burden about competition and can communicate with students and get along with them calmly. They also have the following unique advantages in managing classes.

- **Have More Time to Manage the Class**

It takes a lot of time and energy to manage a class methodically. Only when the homeroom teacher knows the basic situation, hobbies, and specialties of each student can he be targeted when dealing with various class problems.

The core subject teacher is burdened with heavy daily tasks. Preparing lessons, lectures, and correcting homework often makes them exhausted, and it is challenging to have enough time to deal with the complicated class management tasks. There is also no opportunity to communicate and talk with students, so it is not easy to truly understand students' needs. This factor is also very likely to create a gap that can cause contradictions and hidden dangers. However, compared with the core subject, the amount of lesson preparation and homework correction for teachers is much less for the non-core subject. Therefore, non-core subject teachers have more time and energy than core subject teachers (Fu, 2015).

- **Treat all Subjects Indiscriminately and Promote the Balanced Development of Students' Performance in all Subjects**

In actual work, due to the pressure of appraisal and appraisal, the core subject teacher as a homeroom teacher often consciously or unconsciously pays more attention to the subject he teaches, which is likely to cause the occurrence of student "skew phenomenon." For non-core subject teachers who are homeroom teachers, language, mathematics, and foreign subjects are often placed in equally essential positions. Simultaneously, the non-core subject teacher can also cooperate with the core subject teacher to select weak subjects that make most students feel tricky and carry out targeted supplementary work (Lai, 2014).

- **Combination of Work and Rest is Conducive to the Overall Development of Students**

Being a homeroom teacher, the core subject teacher often asks students to "appropriate" some of the time that should have been used to develop their specialties to do the subject's homework, which adds to the students' schoolwork burden. With non-core sub-

ject teachers serving as homeroom teachers, they can make full use of their spare time to mobilize students' hobbies and develop their comprehensive qualities. For example, in the school curriculum's activity class, core subjects have many tasks necessary for teaching to be completed every day. Therefore, some teachers will take up the activity time to relax, while non-core subject teachers tend to give them this time. As long as the students have completed the day's learning tasks, they can relax and do activities as much as possible to combine work with rest. Such an educational philosophy is more in line with elementary school students' physical and mental development characteristics (Li, 2017).

Reasons Why Non-Core Subject Teacher is Blocked from Serving as Homeroom Teacher

- **The School's Training Goals are not Unified**

The training goal is the specific educational goal that should be achieved as stipulated by all levels and types of schools and each school period. School training goals should refer to the comprehensive analysis and research of schools at all levels and types of schools. Under the guidance of the government's training goals, according to the different characteristics of the region and the school, the scientific, reasonable, and standardized training goals that reflect the school's characteristics are formulated. At this stage, most of the school's training goals reflect comprehensive development requirements and the development of moral and innovative capabilities.

However, in the actual implementation, influenced by the college entrance examination system, education's instrumental and utilitarian nature was overemphasized. The entrance rate and the number of champions in the college entrance examination became indicators for evaluating school education quality. The value orientation of elite education has attracted parents and society, leading to educate talents for examinations (Hu, 2013). Activities that allow students to get high scores, subjects other than the college entrance examination requirements must make concessions to the core subject. Eventually, the compressor cut class hours of the non-core subjects. The teaching subjects that were initially required to be opened were changed in practice because they had to make way for the examination subjects, and some were even canceled. The severe imbalance of students' knowledge acquisition and comprehensive ability training, physical health and mental health, ability development and moral development, etc., makes the goal of education and training seriously abnormal.

- **Non-Diversified Educational Evaluation**

In the context of exam-oriented education, some elementary and middle schools have a limited understanding of education. They equate education with teaching. In this way, the admission rate, score compliance rate, and high scores are the only criteria for measuring leadership performance and teacher teaching quality. The same goes for student evaluation. The existing evaluation and examination system emphasizes the selec-

tion function too much and ignores promoting student development. The evaluation's content is too focused on the one-dimensional evaluation of knowledge and skills and ignores the comprehensive quality of students' morals, labor, and art.

Under a single educational evaluation mechanism, the school favors the core subject occupying half of the high school and college entrance examination scores. In many schools, non-core subject teachers, especially teachers whose teaching results cannot be directly measured by scores, have quietly become invisible people in school teaching activities. Even today, when more emphasis is placed on student diversification and independent development, some schools are still unable to innovate the class management model to fear affecting the school's enrollment rate. Most elementary school homeroom teachers are still cored subject teachers (Yu, 2018).

● **Under the Traditional Concept, Parents Have Prejudice Against Non-Core Subject Teacher**

The news that P.E. teachers acted as homeroom teachers and their parents complained aroused heated discussions in society and showed the parents' prejudice against non-core subject teachers. Non-core subject teachers are often labeled as low grades in cultural courses. Parents will have a prejudice that once a non-core subject teacher is used as a homeroom teacher, it will delay student learning.

Simultaneously, in parents' eyes, test-oriented education is still dominant compared to quality education. Because the core subject teacher has a large number of class hours and has a more significant impact on student performance, it has become a tradition for the core subject teacher to be a homeroom teacher. On the other hand, non-core subject teachers who have been on the fringe of school education for a long time are not trusted by parents and may even be treated differently (Hu, 2019). For example, P.E. teachers are quickly labeled as "simple minds and well-developed limbs" by their parents. The general public also generally thinks that P.E. teachers only need to teach students specific motor skills and do not need exceptionally advanced thinking. The resulting "stereotype" makes non-core subject teachers' social status represented by P.E. teachers different from core subject teachers such as language, mathematics, and English. Therefore, letting a non-core subject teacher serve as a homeroom teacher does not promote students' long-term development in parents' eyes, and it will even drag down students' academic performance (Chen, 2014).

● **The Quality of the Non-Core Subject Teacher is Uneven**

The homeroom teacher needs to be fully responsible for the thought, study, health, and life of a class of students, so the position of homeroom teacher requires teachers to have excellent class management skills and rich experience. However, many non-core subject teachers lack training opportunities, so they lack class management's ability and experience. Zhao (2016) investigated the management of homeroom teachers in Jiefang Middle School in Jiangnan District, Wuhan, and found that the class management method in which art teachers act as homeroom teachers is single. Most of them can only

be managed by supervision. The most lacking is with parents exchange experience in communication.

Resolution Strategy

Establish an Education and Training Goal for All-Round Development

The school must establish an education and training goal of comprehensive development. Put moral education, physical education, aesthetic education, labor education, and moral education in an equally important position, change the teaching status quo of excessive emphasis on Chinese, mathematics, physics, chemistry, English, and other test subjects while ignoring “non-core subjects.” Attach importance to the cultivation of students’ survivability, competitiveness, creativity, resilience, and innovative spirit to adapt to society. We must earnestly promote the education and teaching reform that focuses on students’ overall development and improves students’ overall quality. It is necessary to avoid the bottleneck or “shortcoming” of students’ all-round development and lifelong development due to underestimation of “non-core subject” (Wang, 2019).

By establishing a comprehensive development of education and training goals to change primary education, and under the severe interference of unilateral pursuit of enrollment rate, the abnormal “examination-oriented education” is cut off so that primary education can return to normal.

Reform the School’s Educational Evaluation System and Establish a Diversified Evaluation Mechanism

Schools should innovate the process evaluation method of morality, intelligence, physical education, and art. Improve the comprehensive quality evaluation system and insist on putting morality first, ability first, comprehensive development, and unity of knowledge and action.

In terms of evaluation content and academic evaluation, schools should include learning music, fine arts, calligraphy, and other art courses and participate in art practice activities organized by the school into academic requirements. Participate in the study and practice of labor education courses into the comprehensive quality files of students. Strengthen process evaluation and establish an examination mechanism that combines daily participation in skill tests.

Through the reform of the evaluation system, break the status quo of “score only theory.” Let schools, parents, and schools pay attention to examinations and learn to focus their attention and energy on all aspects conducive to students’ development and implement and promote them in the system.

Improve the Status of Non-Core Subjects in the Hearts of Parents

Suppose a non-core subject teacher wants to improve the non-core subject's status in the minds of parents. In that case, the first step is to communicate with parents directly so that parents abandon the utilitarian educational psychology and recognize the non-core subject's value in promoting students' overall development. For example, art teachers can show parents the effects of art classes to relieve pressure and achieve the combination of work and rest. They can emphasize that the results of individual large art competitions are related to the qualification of art students at the high school entrance examination; establish special art classrooms and increase art educational equipment, immersing parents in the charm of art in the form of open classes is also one of the effective ways to improve parents' impression of art classes. Improving the non-core subject's status in parents' minds can enable parents to understand the importance of quality education. Erase the negative impression of the general lack of non-core subject teachers' professional abilities in parents' minds to encourage them to actively cooperate with homeroom teachers' work so that home-school education can go hand in hand and be closely connected.

Enhance Professional Class Management Ability of Non-Core Subject Teacher

As a teaching worker, a non-core subject teacher should continuously enrich his connotation, arm himself with advanced theoretical knowledge, improve his cultural literacy, and refine his character without losing any opportunity. Only in this way can it better educate students. If a non-core subject teacher wants a homeroom teacher to go smoothly and have enough prestige and influence in the class, he must have a healthy professional level and teaching ability. In the face of various emergencies that may appear in class management, teachers also need to have a broad knowledge reserve. Therefore, establish a mutual communication and exchange platform between homeroom teachers. Let teachers with longer teaching years and rich teaching practical experience impart new homeroom teachers, learn from each other's strengths, and progress together. It is necessary to improve the quality of being a homeroom teacher through continuous learning (Zhao, 2016).

Conclusions and Perspectives

The dispute between core subject and non-core subject teachers as homeroom teachers ultimately points to primary education in China, which is a discussion brought about by the collision of test-oriented education and quality education. From the perspective of student development, a qualified homeroom teacher should have good management, communication, leadership skills, tolerance and patience, a broad knowledge of person-

al qualities, and a teacher with personality and charisma is more competent as a homeroom teacher. Therefore, “core subject” and “non-core subject” cannot be regarded as the only criteria for judging whether a homeroom teacher is competent.

Judging from the current educational environment, education can no longer simply divide subjects into “core” and “non-core” (Zhang, 2014). A healthy physique, sound emotion, and good moral character have become indispensable and essential in education and teaching. Music, physical and fine arts disciplines, and school-based courses have increasingly highlighted their importance.

To balance the roles of core subject teachers and non-core subject teachers in classwork, schools in some places have implemented the exploration of the “dual homeroom teacher system” model. The principal and deputy homeroom teachers’ establishment, the deputy homeroom teachers are mostly non-core subject teachers such as art, music, and sports. “Non-core subject” teachers are nourishing students with their “unique” professional knowledge, are “leading” students with their “unique” personality charm, and are enjoying their love and respect for them (Hu, 2017).

Therefore, for teachers, professional class management skills and advanced educational ideas focus on being a competent homeroom teacher and have nothing to do with core subject and non-core subject. Schools and all social sectors should provide an atmosphere for teachers to respect talents and develop their individuality. Eliminate untrue opinions about non-core subject teachers, treat all teachers equally, and fully mobilize each teacher’s enthusiasm for talent and development. Therefore, the position of homeroom teacher has more room for development, and at the same time, it can better play the critical role of this position in school education.

Note

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