

Research on the Role of Adult Cultural and Technical Schools in Supporting Community Learning Center Development in County Areas

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Abstract: In the context of building a learning society, lifelong learning has become an indispensable necessity for everyone. To adapt to this trend, the Ministry of Education issued the *Key Tasks for Building a Learning Society* in August 2023, which emphasizes the promotion of community learning centers at the county level. It specifically states the need to strengthen community education at the township (or street) level, with "township adult schools" identified as a primary vehicle for achieving this goal. This paper aims to address three key questions through a combined analysis of data from township adult schools in Zhejiang Province: First, it will clarify the significance of vigorously developing township adult schools for the establishment of county-level community learning centers. Second, it will explore the real issues that hinder township adult schools from fully performing their roles as hubs and vehicles within the context of county community learning center development. Third, it will propose practical solutions to address the challenges facing township adult schools, aiming to realize the vision of effectively supporting the construction and development of county-level community learning centers.

Keywords: township adult schools, county-level community learning centers, learning society

Introduction

Township adult cultural and technical schools (hereinafter referred to as "township adult schools") occupy the middle level of the three-tier community learning center network across county, township, and village levels, playing a vital role in establishing county-level community learning centers. Clarifying the value and development path of township adult schools not only supports their own transformation and development but also contributes to building a lifelong education system and advancing the construction of a learning-oriented society.

1. Concept definition

In 1987, Chinese governments issued the *Interim Regulations on Township Farmers' Cultural and Technical Schools*. Based on the document's provisions, the concept of township adult schools can be summarized as follows: These schools are established and jointly managed by township governments and educational departments, staffed with a mix of full-time and part-time teachers, and supported by multiple funding channels. They serve adults in townships and surrounding areas, by providing comprehensive and multifunctional rural adult education in areas such as ideological and political education, literacy training, job skills training, practical agricultural technology training, cultural and educational advancement, and social life education.^[1]

2. Importance of township adult schools in building county community learning centers

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2.1 Township adult schools as intermediate hubs in the three-tier community learning center network

In the comprehensive promotion of building county community learning centers, all township adult schools occupy an intermediate level in the three-tier community learning center network, guided and supervised by local county community education colleges.^[2] They receive policy directions, educational resources, and advanced educational concepts from higher education departments and bring valuable resources into the township community, providing residents with richer and higher-quality educational services. Additionally, township adult schools can offer necessary support and assistance to village (community) teaching stations, thereby enhancing overall educational quality and service levels. In summary, township adult schools, through a three-tier interaction mechanism, help create a closely connected network system among county, township, and village community learning centers. Therefore, they are important institutions for coordinating urban and rural educational resources, and key hubs in the three-tier community learning center network.

2.2 Township adult schools as primary carriers of township community schools

Based on observations and analyses of the current situation of several township adult schools in Zhejiang Province, it is evident that these schools are gradually displaying trends of comprehensiveness, openness, and inclusivity. Furthermore, as the main carriers of township community schools, township adult schools have many advantages in undertaking rural community education tasks. First, they possess certain teaching facilities and faculty strength, providing diverse learning opportunities and comprehensive educational services for community residents. Second, they can enrich the spiritual and cultural lives of community residents by organizing various cultural activities. Third, they can enhance farmers' income and promote local economic prosperity through practical skills training and employment entrepreneurship training. Thus, from the perspectives of individual and social development, establishing unified township community schools through township adult schools can promote the overall harmonious development of township communities.

3. New challenges facing township adult schools in the context of building county community learning centers

3.1 Disconnection in educational management

Township adult schools operate under a typical dual management system. Administratively, they fall under the jurisdiction of the county-level education authority, which is responsible for teacher staffing, salary distribution, performance evaluations, and other aspects. However, in practice, the responsibilities are shared between the county education department and the township government, resulting in fragmented management and a chaotic system.

3.2 Insufficient allocation of educational resources

Township adult schools often face substantial issues regarding the supply and distribution of educational resources. In terms of faculty, challenges such as low salaries, limited staffing, and a lack of specialized talent have resulted in an aging, underqualified, and non-professional teaching workforce. Regarding educational facilities, many township adult schools suffer from outdated hardware, cramped or abandoned teaching spaces. Financially, these schools predominantly rely on support from township governments and education authorities, which hampers their autonomy and stability in funding.^[3]

3.3 Challenges in mobilization and low participation rates

From the perspective of the schools themselves, the limited channels for information dissemination in township areas and the singular mobilization strategies of township adult schools make it difficult to reach a broader range of potential learners. For learners, especially in remote rural areas, issues such as an aging population and hollowing out are severe. Many women and elderly individuals are often occupied with farming, childcare, or other daily livelihood activities, leaving little time to engage in the courses and activities offered by township adult schools.

3.4 Disconnect between course content and individual and local needs

In some township adult schools, particularly those in underdeveloped areas, the curriculum often lacks local relevance and specificity. Most courses are designed based on traditional educational models or the requirements of higher education institutions, neglecting practical application. Furthermore, there is a lack of dynamic and sustainable mechanisms for

updating course content, which fails to meet residents' needs for new knowledge and skills. In some cases, courses are even offered merely to comply with inspections from higher education authorities, rather than addressing genuine learning needs.

4. New strategies for the reform and development of township adult schools

4.1 Innovating management models

Under the unified guidance of the central government and the Ministry of Education, local governments at all levels should optimize the management models for township adult schools. While maintaining the existing institutional and personnel relationships, responsibilities should be assigned to county open universities or community colleges to strengthen business guidance, teacher training, project development, and information exchange for township adult schools. This would create an integrated educational network led by county open universities, with township adult schools as the backbone, extending to village-level institutions.

4.2 Enhancing resource sharing and collaborative networks

Higher education institutions and vocational schools should establish closer, long-term cooperative relationships with township adult schools by sharing high-quality faculty, library and research facilities, and online course resources. This collaboration would enhance the quality and diversity of educational content at township adult schools.^[4] Additionally, integrating and optimizing the resources for rural adult education at the county, township, and village levels—by sharing personnel, funds, and facilities with local community colleges, enterprises, and cultural halls—can improve resource utilization efficiency and reduce educational costs.

4.3 Strengthening teacher workforce development

The professional development of teachers and course development are core factors in improving educational quality. Township adult schools should regularly organize professional training and workshops for teachers, utilizing blended learning models that combine online courses with face-to-face seminars to accommodate teachers' schedules and learning needs. Moreover, training should focus on enhancing practical teaching skills, such as classroom management and assessment, to elevate teaching quality.

4.4 Enhancing school visibility and recognition

To attract community residents, township adult schools should host public classes, seminars, and other activities at local community centers or public spaces. Existing communication channels, such as village broadcasts, flyers, and newspapers—often more influential in rural areas—should be utilized to promote school activities and courses. Additionally, online platforms, including social media and modern communication tools like official accounts, broadcasts, and short videos, should be employed to increase the visibility and participation in courses and projects, fostering a positive educational ecosystem.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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