

# ***Experience in Constructing a Three-Tier Network System for Community-Based Elderly Education from the Perspective of Active Aging***

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**Abstract:** With the increase in the elderly population, China has entered an aging society. Actively responding to the aging society has become the key work of elderly education. Relying on its special management mechanism and unique geographical location, Guangzhou has explored distinctive experience in elderly education. Combined with the rich experience of Huangpu District in promoting elderly education, this paper sorts out the practical experience of the three-level network construction for elderly education with the participation of private colleges and universities, constructs a unique three-level school-running system of district-subdistrict (town)-neighborhood (village) committee, and clarifies the main responsibilities of each level of the school-running system, so as to provide reference experience for the construction of the three-level network for elderly education under the background of active aging.

## **1. Introduction**

In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally put forward the initiative of "Active Aging" at the Second World Assembly on Ageing. Active Aging is a multidimensional and dynamic process that not only focuses on the physical health of older adults, but also emphasizes their continued opportunities and capacities to participate in social, economic, cultural, and civic affairs. It further highlights the importance of optimizing psychological capital to enhance quality of life, with the aim of addressing the trend of population aging in a positive, optimistic, and diversified manner. Active Aging not only explores how to eliminate barriers to social participation among older adults through policy, community, and technological means, and to unleash their intrinsic potential, but also sets forth new requirements for the structural framework of elderly education—a framework that must be built "from the bottom up" to comprehensively meet the diverse needs of the elderly population.

According to statistics, by the end of 2024, China's total population (including residents of 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government, as well as active military personnel, but excluding residents of Chinese Hong Kong, Chinese Macao, and Chinese Taiwan, and foreign nationals residing within these 31 provincial-level divisions) stood at 1.408 billion, with 310.31 million people aged 60 and above, accounting for 22.0% of the national

total. Among them, 220.23 million were aged 65 and above, representing 15.6% of the total population[1]. By the end of 2023, Guangzhou had a registered population of 10.5661 million, of which 1.4715 million were aged 65 and above, accounting for 13.93% of the registered population[2].

According to the classification criteria established in the United Nations report *The Aging of Populations and Its Socio-Economic Consequences*, when the share of the population aged 65 and above exceeds 7% of the total population in a given country or region, that country or region is considered to have entered an aging society. It is thus evident that Guangzhou has already stepped into an aging society, and the needs of the elderly population have shifted from "being supported in old age," "accessing medical care in old age," and "receiving basic education in old age" to "engaging in lifelong learning in old age," "finding enjoyment in old age," and "contributing productively in old age".

Since the 20th National Congress, actively responding to population aging, continuously improving the social governance system, building the basic public service system, and advancing the construction of the basic elderly care service system have become key priorities in community education and elderly education nationwide. As the core city of the Guangdong-Hong Kong- Macao Greater Bay Area, Guangzhou has a long history and rich practical experience in community education and elderly education, and has forged a distinctly unique structural framework for elderly education.

In advancing the work of Active Aging, Guangzhou has leveraged its special management mechanism and unique geographical location to establish a unique three-level school-running system of District-Subdistrict (Town)-Neighborhood (Village) Committee within each jurisdiction , clearly delineating the responsibilities of elderly education institutions at each level and further ensuring the smooth implementation of elderly education. The education bureau of each district bears overall responsibility for coordinating the full scope of elderly education work within the district, defining the leadership and management mechanisms of government and relevant departments at all levels to ensure the effective delivery of elderly education in its jurisdiction, while drawing on various resources within the district to construct the three-level school-running system for elderly education. At present, most districts in Guangzhou have established district-level community colleges by drawing on resources such as radio and television universities (RTVUs), Youth League schools, and higher vocational colleges within their jurisdictions, so as to carry out community education and elderly education. However, Huangpu District and Nansha District stand somewhat apart: these two districts have established their district-level community colleges by relying on private colleges and universities within their respective jurisdictions, which are responsible for delivering community education and elderly education across the whole district. Furthermore, under the guidance of Guangzhou Open University, they jointly carry out elderly education in collaboration with the district-level RTVU. This arrangement thus possesses a certain distinctiveness.

Given the distinctiveness of elderly education in Huangpu District and Nansha District, this paper focuses on the experience of elderly education in Huangpu District of Guangzhou as a case study, sharing the experiences and practices of private colleges and universities participating in elderly education.

## **2. Primary Responsibilities of the District Community College and the District Radio and Television University(RTVU)**

Under the leadership of the district education bureau, the district community college and the district-level RTVU primarily serve as the pacesetter, hub, research and development center, and

training base for elderly education across the entire district, integrating resources within the jurisdiction and undertaking such responsibilities as conducting district-wide research projects, building community (and elderly) education brand initiatives, and developing a community education workforce.

## **2.1 Carrying Out Workforce Development**

Faculty development is a common challenge faced by community education across all regions of the country. Since elderly education serves populations with varying needs, it is necessary to deploy instructors for different courses in order to effectively meet the diverse needs of different groups.

### **2.1.1 Establishing a "Hundred-Lecturer Corps" by Leveraging High-Quality Resources**

Relying on the high-quality teaching staff from various institutions of higher education within their jurisdictions, the Huangpu Community College and the District Radio and Television University have integrated multi-channel resources from social, corporate, and academic sectors both within the district and across Guangzhou, as well as experts from various fields of society, to actively develop a teaching force for elderly education. This effort has culminated in the formation of a "Hundred-Lecturer Corps" volunteer teaching team (currently comprising over 200 volunteer instructors). The faculty within the Corps covers a wide array of course offerings, including health and wellness, legal literacy, and intergenerational communication, among others, meeting over 95% of the curriculum needs for elderly education within the district. This initiative provides robust instructional support for the delivery of "Community Lecture Series" at the grassroots level.

### **2.1.2 Conducting regular teacher training to enhance instructors' professional competence**

The volunteer faculty members come from a diverse range of professions and trades. Although they possess considerable professional expertise, they have relatively limited knowledge of elderly education. To enhance the proficiency of volunteer instructors in the field of elderly education, the district-level community college, with the support of the district education bureau and in collaboration with the district-level RTVU, has organized special-topic training sessions for volunteer instructors on an ad hoc basis, thereby improving their professional competence. At the same time, to boost the motivation of volunteer instructors, regular outstanding volunteer instructor selection activities have been held to set forth exemplary role models and further increase their enthusiasm. Based on the measures outlined above, Huangpu District has established the "100-Person Lecturer Corps"-a volunteer faculty team whose members not only span a wide range of professions and trades, but also possess a high level of professional knowledge and competence, thus providing a stable teaching team for elderly education in Huangpu District.

## **2.2 Deepening the internal development of educational content**

Huangpu District has a long history of delivering community education and elderly education and has accumulated rich practical experience. The district-level community college has actively carried out research and field surveys across subdistricts and towns, integrating resources within the jurisdiction, and developing training courses and reading materials for elderly education based on the principle of "meeting needs and guiding needs." Building on the foundation of training delivery, the college has drawn on its practical experience and actively conducted various research projects to deepen the internal development of community education.

### 2.2.1 Developing courses to meet needs

Howard Yale McClusky, regarded as the "father of educational gerontology" in the United States, proposed the Categories of Need theory at the 1971 White House Conference on Aging (McClusky, 1971). This theory extends the needs of older adults to the psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, systematically classifying the needs of the elderly population into five levels: Coping Needs, Expressive Needs, Contributive Needs, Influence Needs, and Transcendence Needs[3,4]. Drawing on McClusky's Categories of Need theory, Huangpu District has adhered to the principles of "meeting needs" and "guiding needs," and has relied on the high-quality resources of the "100-Person Lecturer Corps" to develop a wide range of training courses for elderly education, thereby addressing the diverse needs of the elderly population.

With "guiding needs" and "meeting needs" as the fundamental principles, and drawing on the high-quality faculty resources of the "100-Person Lecturer Corps," Huangpu District has developed over 200 thematic training courses for residents, covering such areas as civic literacy, health and wellness, and lifestyle and leisure, and has cultivated the distinctive brand of "Community Lecture Halls," thereby truly realizing the vision of "engaging in lifelong learning in old age, contributing productively in old age, and finding enjoyment in old age."

In addition to delivering regular thematic training courses for residents, Huangpu District has continuously and flexibly adapted the forms and methods of community education. Examples include organizing the "National Lifelong Learning Activity Week" to raise awareness of learning among the elderly population; mobilizing volunteer medical workers to carry out the "Guangzhou Medical Experts Free Clinic" initiative, which provided a wide range of health and medical consultation and services to over 300 residents; organizing members of local calligraphy associations to hold "Welcoming Spring and Sending Blessings" Spring Festival couplet-delivery activities in the run-up to the Chinese New Year; and collaborating with higher vocational colleges within the jurisdiction to organize student volunteer teams to deliver community volunteer services. These efforts have not only enriched the daily lives of residents, but also strengthened the connections between various sectors of society and community education, and deepened the internal substance of community education.

### 2.2.2 Integrating practice to deepen theoretical research

Beyond routine elderly education activities, Huangpu District has used practical activities as a foundation for theoretical research, actively engaging in and undertaking various research projects related to community education to deepen theoretical inquiry. The Huangpu Community College and the district-level RTVU have, in response to pressing social issues and the actual needs of residents, proactively developed a wide range of training materials, thereby enriching the internal substance of elderly education.

## 2.3 Carrying Out Brand Building

The circumstances of each jurisdiction differ, as do the qualities and needs of the elderly populations they serve. Each jurisdiction can, in light of the distinctive features of its various subdistricts, towns, and communities, guide community schools and community teaching sites in actively carrying out elderly education and training activities, integrate resources, establish elderly education demonstration sites, and strive to create "one brand for each subdistrict and one brand for each community," thereby cultivating distinctive elderly education brands within the jurisdiction.

For example, to better fulfill the role of demonstration and guidance and to enrich the educational experience of the elderly population, Huangpu District has actively guided social

organizations in fostering community-level brand projects. To date, the district has established a total of 11 "elderly education experience (experimental) bases" and cultivated over 100 "elderly learning communities," fundamentally enhancing the sense of participation and experiential engagement in elderly education, and enriching the significance of elderly education as a whole.

### **3. The Main Responsibilities of Community Schools at the Subdistrict (Town) Level**

Each subdistrict and town plays a pivotal bridging role-connecting the higher and lower levels-in elderly education work. Community schools have been established at the subdistrict and town levels to focus on delivering community education and elderly education within their respective jurisdictions. In coordination with the district community college and the district-level RTVU, they actively deliver courses down to the neighborhood (village) level, carry out elderly education activities at the subdistrict and town levels, and raise the coverage rate of elderly education. At the same time, they manage and guide the capacity of elderly education workstations at the neighborhood (village) level to serve the grassroots, identify and collate the specific needs of elderly populations in each neighborhood and village, and ensure that the needs of the elderly population can be both discovered and met.

#### **3.1 Designating personnel in charge of elderly education to ensure the smooth implementation of subdistrict and town activities**

The smooth implementation of elderly education activities cannot be achieved without the support of the subdistricts and towns. Accordingly, to ensure the effective delivery of elderly activities, each subdistrict and town relies on its administrative offices to assign dedicated personnel to take charge of the relevant work within the jurisdiction. Acting as a bridge connecting the neighborhood/village committees with the community college and the RTVU, these designated staff members are responsible for liaising with the community college and the RTVU, organizing various thematic training sessions and activities, and communicating with the neighborhood (village) committees within the jurisdiction to gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific needs of different neighborhood (village) committees, thereby ensuring the smooth implementation of elderly activities.

#### **3.2 Organizing distinctive themed activities**

Huangpu District was formed through the merger of the former Luogang District and the former Huangpu District, and as such it encompasses the traditional characteristics of the old urban area, the elderly population from local village-to-community conversions, and a migrant population that has become the new Guangzhou residents. In view of the distinct nature of these population groups, each subdistrict and town has, in light of its own distinctive features and in response to policy priorities and residents' needs, actively organized a variety of community activities. The themes of these activities span science education on green environmental protection, revolutionary heritage education, family education, and more, thereby both increasing residents' participation and meeting the needs of different groups, while at the same time promoting the integration of community education into community governance.

#### **3.3 Compiling Brand Case Studies**

Each subdistrict and town, in light of the local progress of elderly education and its own distinctive features, has summarized its experience and compiled brand case studies to elevate the

internal substance of community education at the local level. For instance, in the former Jiulong Town (which has since been reorganized into Jiufu Subdistrict, Longhu Subdistrict, and Xinlong Town), elderly activities were frequently held by certain village committees under banyan trees, and as a result a themed elderly education activity called "Under the Great Banyan Tree" took shape. This activity not only reflects the distinctive character of the village but also attracts the interest of local villagers. The community college, in collaboration with local staff, compiled this case into a formal write-up, establishing it as one of the distinctive brand initiatives for elderly education in that town.

#### **4. Building Community Teaching Sites at the Neighborhood (Village) Committee Level**

As the smallest unit within the three-tier network system, elderly education teaching sites have the closest bond with the elderly population, are most familiar with the needs of the elderly population within their jurisdiction, and enjoy the highest degree of trust from the elderly community. Therefore, in addition to ensuring the smooth implementation of routine elderly education activities, the primary task of the neighborhood (village) committees is to, on the basis of community visits and field surveys, gain a thorough understanding of basic information about residents within the jurisdiction, shift the center of gravity downward and consolidate the foundation, guide the elderly population as much as possible in articulating their needs, and actively coordinate with community schools and the community college in carrying out various types of elderly education courses and activities, so as to meet the needs of the elderly population and ensure full coverage of elderly education.

The implementation of Active Aging cannot be achieved successfully by relying solely on the efforts of the government, community colleges, and subdistricts and towns. It is necessary to explore an open and sustainable sharing model for learning resources, and to continuously expand the supply of learning resources. For example, "community education experience bases" may be established by drawing on such venues as branch libraries of subdistrict libraries, community workstations, Starlight Homes, and community reading rooms, so as to promote the opening of public facilities-including libraries, science and technology museums, cultural centers, museums, and sports venues, as well as schools at all levels and of all types - to the elderly population in the community[5]. Social training institutions should be encouraged to share teaching resources with community comprehensive service centers (stations), community cultural centers, and similar institutions, so that a single venue can serve multiple functions and the benefits of grassroots public learning resources can be maximized. Only by realizing resource sharing within the jurisdiction can the role of elderly education be maximized, and only in this way can the construction of the elderly (and community) education system be actively and effectively advanced.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The smooth implementation of elderly education cannot be achieved without strong leadership. Therefore, in order to ensure the effective delivery of elderly education, it is necessary to establish a district-wide elderly education leading group, with the relevant deputy leaders of the district committee and the district education bureau serving as the group leader, and the responsible leaders for elderly (and community) education at each subdistrict serving as members. By clearly delineating the specific responsibilities of each level of organization and regularly convening meetings of the community education leading group, elderly education activities can be fundamentally prioritized, thereby actively and effectively advancing the construction of the elderly education system.

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