

## **Participatory Development: The Starting Point of Community Education**

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**Abstract:** Community education refers to the activity of imparting knowledge to residents in specific areas. Some achievements have been made in the domain after many years of development. Under the concept of participatory development, we have found out that the conventional manner of "top-down" planning and decision-making usually fails to be recognized by education organizers or recipients. The introduction of participatory development shows us the starting point of community education, thus being greatly conducive to improving the organization and management of community education.

**Keywords:** Community education; participatory development; PRT appraisal

### **1. The "Prosperity" and "Disorder" of Community Education**

Community education is an activity of imparting knowledge to residents in specific areas beyond conventional education, with or without the issuance of diplomas. Community education tends to be marginalized in a country since it does not draw any attention unless the economy and conventional education of that country are highly developed. All governments tend to invest their major efforts and finances in compulsory education and full-time tertiary education. Only when the two categories are guaranteed do they ever discuss compensatory education for adults, with or without diplomas. Community education is often voluntary learning with some utilitarian elements. In other words, the number of learners tends to be great if such education can bring about actual benefits to the participants; otherwise the number naturally falls. Community education is not compulsory; hence the willingness of learners is the key to its sustainable development.

Currently, we can say that community education is "prosperous" in China. Indeed, many authorities are involved in community education because the country does not have specific laws regarding the related organization or status. The authorities of civil affairs, for example, are actively participating in the development of community education since community construction is within their administrative powers. Besides, the authorities of cultural and sports administration are continuing the construction of related venues and facilities. In recent years, organization units of CPC committees are also providing distance education for party members. The educational authorities, of course, pay the most direct attention to that aspect. Apart from promulgating relevant regulations, the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) has also started the construction, review and acceptance inspections of pilot and exemplar zones of community education. To be specific, the MOE approved of and identified eight urban districts, including Chaoyang of Beijing, as national pilot zones of community education in 2000, as well as 34 urban districts, including Xicheng of Beijing, as national exemplar zones in that regard in 2008. Both numbers reached 68 by the end of 2010. In 2010, the MOE's General Office printed and promulgated the "Criteria for Appraisal of Exemplar Zones of Community Education (Tentative)". Besides, the Professional Committee of Community Education, a subsidiary of the Chinese Adult Education Association, started carrying out the "Construction of Digital Learning Communities" in 2009, establishing a number of digital community learning centers across China since then.

Radio and TV universities (RTVUs) are the most active, devoted and enthusiastic participants within the education sector, organizing the most diversified activities related to community education. RTVUs have always regarded community education as a task of continuing education, being the pioneers in that regard within the education sector. For example, Qingdao Community College was founded in Shandong Province in 2002 based on the city's original Radio and Television University, being the first one of its kind in China. At present, there are 29 municipal RTVUs with their community colleges sharing the same facilities and teaching resources. Some provincial RTVUs have established their instruction service centers for community education. In 2009, the Central Radio and Television University (CRTVU) approved of establishing 44 "experiment centers for community education" at its subsidiaries throughout the country. And in December 2010, the MOE transferred its "Research & Training Center for Community Education" to the CRTVU.

On the other hand, some tertiary institutions and non-profit organizations have also set up colleges (universities) of community education in different regions, such as the Shiwu Village Community College jointly established by Renmin University of China and Danzhou City of Hainan Province, the Guzhen Town Community College jointly run by the Citizenship and Social Development Research Center of Sun Yat-sen University and Guzhen Town of Zhongshan City in Guangdong Province, as well as community education colleges set up by some community administration offices or neighborhood committees.

In carrying out activities of community education, we must adhere to the basic principle of "participation of service users". To be specific, learners' participation in the top-level design is a fundamental element of how community education is different from formal schooling. Is it necessary or how is it possible for Local residents as recipients of community education to participate in the related processes of planning, design, administration and implementation? What is the role of local residents? And is there any wrong if the government takes charge of the overall design and organization of community education while the residents just focus on learning issues?

Community education is different from local residents' learning and even lifelong learning, with the fact that it is a government behavior with the exercise of powers. Lifelong learning, on the other hand, is a spontaneous action on the learners' part, without involving much enforcement by the government. The main existing problem is that community education is carried out in a "top-down" rather than "bottom-up" manner in China. Service users, or local residents, do not participate in the top-level design of community education, and they are never treated as "players" in the design or planning process. Instead, the government or related experts become "players" while those residents as service users become "spectators". Such an innate defect naturally makes community education into some kind of "wishful thinking", thus leading to difficulties in its implementation.

At the same time, there is not a single and specific regulator of community education; administrative units within the government are just "fiddling with" community education whenever they have the power, money and time to do so. As a result, infrastructure and teaching resources of community education are insufficient and inadequate in some places, while they are wasted and redundant in others. The disorder in the administrative control system leads to the poor development of community education.

In some places, community education is simply equivalent to sports and recreational activities for local residents, which is indeed a misinterpretation of its fundamental meaning. Sports and recreational activities in the community have always been highly spontaneous, while participants also hope that the government can organize such activities and provide support in terms of venues, equipment and funds. However, even without such support from the government, sports and recreational activities can still be carried out spontaneously in the community, sometimes even resulting in a large scale and lucrative profits. Therefore, the problem of "orderless" development naturally appears. While such activities require the organization, guidance and support by the government, they cannot be simply understood as "education", which, after all, refers to activities inspiring the intelligent and moral development of human beings, never to be equated with sports and recreational activities.

## **II. Participatory Development Theory and Community Education**

"Participation" is in fact an important procedure in democratic politics. The concept of "participation" in the development of the Third World originated from the West, but is much more complex in terms of the meanings contained and accumulated therein. Here, "participation", as a concept from the West, is increasingly broader in connotation, more extensive in scope and more complex in the techniques of expression. The concept of participation includes two meanings, i.e., shared decision-making and power sharing. To be specific, participants should have the right to establish rules for the development of community education, which would be otherwise monopolized by others. They should also have more independent powers in making major decisions on community education.

As a manifestation of power relations, participation means abandoning the central power of control, thus being a process and means of "empowerment". Powers are regarded as a key clue to understand participatory development. Who has the right to provide, organize or else decide upon community education? Who are the policy-makers and who are the beneficiaries of community education? Those questions are actually raised as the ideological illustration of the entity of powers. Community education tends to totter if the question of powers is not figured out. Based on innocent analysis, the beneficiaries of community education are naturally local residents, who should have the right to decide upon the related means and methods, and who should be the most powerful drivers of community education. In reality, however, community education is often designed and organized by government departments or education experts, who dictate the whole process regardless of whether local residents are in need of certain education projects. Such "thankless" efforts usually "get more kicks than halfpence". It is simply impossible for related projects to be really accepted and appreciated by local residents, which often leads to the waste of educational resources. Under the guidance of participatory development, both organizers and local residents need to understand the powers involved in community education. We should, on the one hand, encourage the powerless to strive for and operate powers, and on the other, force the power holders to give up and transfer their powers. It is actually very difficult to strike a balance as such. Giving up the central power of control, however, does not equal to abandoning all the powers; otherwise, community education cannot obtain any support or help from the government.

"The approaches and methods of studying and implementing participatory development are already widely used in the world, and have become increasingly acceptable for relevant

departments and projects of both the central and local governments." Anthropology seems to be extremely active in the studies of participatory development. Educational anthropologists advocate the adoption of a more "people first" idea of participatory development. From the standpoint of "others", "the locals" should be leaders rather than just objects of development. Accordingly, development workers and development objects should exchange their roles, with the former to become listeners/learners and the latter to be regarded as teachers/experts. Participatory development emphasizes the actual participation of assistance recipients in the decision-making, evaluation, implementation, management and virtually every technical aspect of the developing goals, so as to maximize the achievement of such goals.

"Basic characteristics emphasized by the participatory development theory, such as the bottom-up approach and the participation of target groups, create a significant contrast with the traditional top-down approach of development." The "bottom-up" approach in participatory development enables local residents to spontaneously choose a plan for the development of community education. Such a voluntary choice results in much better implementation of project policies, since local residents are quick to implement and support community education for the sake of maintaining their personal reputations and social status. The core of the participatory development theory is "empowerment", i.e., the redistribution of powers related to the development projects and processes, so as to arouse the enthusiasm of participants. If no local resident wholeheartedly supports community education imposed upon him/her, related activities will be sapless and just become the "window-dressing" or "solo" performance by some people, thus often serving no purpose but self-deception. Participation, of course, does not mean that the government or education experts completely give up their powers and take their hands off community education. Participatory planning and decision-making do not necessarily mean complete independence of the local residents in the process. The designer still has the final say, but the participation of local residents is essential. Besides, it is also necessary to restrict the extent of participation of local residents, who, after all, still need improvement in their capacity and performance of self-government, thus possibly making short-sighted decisions to protect their own interests only. And in many cases, the group psychology still plays a significant role. The implementation of participatory development can enhance the attention of local residents to and inspire their enthusiasm in community education. Such an idea of development therefore is therefore endowed with the sense of self-satisfaction, self-assistance and self-development.

Based on the related practice, participatory development has led to the creation of PRT (participatory rural appraisal), which is a method of rapid survey and backward learning, being the most popular and the most noticeable among all those survey methods. It is recognized as having inversed the powers of conventional learners and those of government officials or education experts, thus empowering learners or surveyed objects to say what they mean in their own words and to make decisions for their own future. Backward learning is also a gesture. In the past, we were too obsessed with our own powers, presuming others' needs from our own perspective and guiding others' life with our familiar projects. Now, with the concept of participatory development, we need to see things from the perspective of "others". "PRT has borrowed some concepts and methods from anthropology, which in turn can better apply the participatory approach to practical applications and research." Some people even equate PRT with participatory development, claiming that any project with PRT would be one of participatory development. "According to the

definition by Robert Chambers, PRT is an umbrella term for all the approaches of studying, practicing/planning and managing participatory development. It is a big 'family' that is constantly innovated and expanding, including various approaches, methods and codes of conduct. And similarly, they are all capable of promoting the empowerment of the community, the masses or the organization members, who conduct the appraisal, analysis and planning on their own, who organize themselves for actions and implementation, and who monitor and evaluate the results."

On May 7, 2012, we conducted a survey using the PRT method with 14 persons from municipal RTVUs in Guangdong Province, including 11 officials and 3 people in charge of community education. Our question was: What do you think is the biggest obstacle for radio and television universities to organize activities of community education? The answers fell into the ten aspects below (in random order):

1. Lack of support and attention from local governments;
2. No specific duties or major players;
3. Lack of manpower;
4. Lack of funds;
5. Inadequate awareness or confused ideas;
6. Insufficient resources and capabilities of education at RTVUs;
7. Difficulties in promoting community education due to the impractical name and the narrow scope;
8. Lack of good ideas;
9. Insufficiency of good experience or practices for reference; and
10. Lack of policy support.

Upon on-site discussion, comparison and analysis, we managed to determine the priorities of those elements as follows:

1. Lack of support and attention from local governments;
2. No specific duties or major players;
3. Inadequate awareness or confused ideas;
4. Insufficient resources and capabilities of education at RTVUs; and
5. Lack of funds;

But we failed to arrange the order of the remaining elements.

According to the survey results, the insufficiency of government support and the lack of specific duties are the two major obstacles for RTVUs to carry out community education, while the lack of manpower or funds is not such a big barrier. In other words, RTVUs can do a good job in community education if the government provides them with great support and endows them with related powers. Unfortunately, it is actually the case that RTVUs are not empowered or

sufficiently supported by the government to provide community education; they carry out related activities just in a voluntary manner.

### **III. Running Mode of the Construction of the Community Education System**

Community education should be organized by the government, but is not necessarily intended for all the residents in the community. More often than not, "rich" or "learned" persons do not need to receive diploma or non-diploma education in the community. They can get access to better education resources elsewhere if necessary. The contents and methods of community education do not necessarily satisfy their requirements. Students in schools or colleges have little to do with community education because their extracurricular hours are often occupied by homework and play. There are still some local residents who do not like or simply cannot afford community education, such as illiterates or those with "school refusal". It is unrealistic to expect them to attend activities of community education. Some people just try to avoid the painful process of learning unless they are asked to receive literacy or compulsory education. Other people, on the contrary, would like to embrace learning but just do not have the time since they are desperate to make ends meet. So we can imagine that the actual participants or the principal recipients of community education are those having the time, desire and abilities to do so, mainly including the elderly, the unemployed, housewives and migrant workers in the community, who can be referred to as "ordinary residents" herein. Since those people cannot afford better and more diversified education elsewhere, they have to settle for community-based education within a certain scope, mainly relating to their needs for skills and leisure acknowledge.

The system of community education must be constructed in a "bottom-up" manner, i.e., based on the concept of "participatory development". If local residents do not have the conditions or means to "participate" in the development of community education, they are no more than recipients contributing just enthusiasm, labor or money to community education projects. Then they actually have little to do with such kind of community education. On the other hand, government officials or experts should become providers, conveners and facilitators of opportunities of "participation" in community education. With power inversion as the goal, participatory development does not lead to the actions in a specific place or group; instead, it can only be a paradigm, i.e., a pattern including the ideas, values and methods of participation.

At present, the educational authorities do not agree with the authorities of civil affairs on the management system of community education, for they both regard themselves as major players and others as cooperators in the regard. The MOE, for example, organized the "National Seminar on Community Education" in Hangzhou City of Zhejiang Province in 2010, proposing better contacts, cooperation and coordination with other authorities and social organizations, so as to jointly promote community education. According to the MOE, in the management of community education, the government should be the "commander-in-chief" while the educational authorities should be the "administrator", with cooperation by other authorities and active support from the community, so as to realize autonomous activities with extensive participation in the community. However, due to the lack of clear stipulations in that regard, there is no consensus even on the competent authorities of community education. The educational authorities take it for granted that the issue is within their jurisdiction, while the authorities of civil affairs make their claim to the issue because they regard it as part of civil administration, a duty assigned to them by the State

Council of China. In November 2000, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly forwarded the "Opinions by the Ministry of Civil Affairs on the Promotion of Urban Community Construction Across the Country", stipulating that community construction and management should be "conducted under the leadership of CPC committees and governments, facilitated mainly by the authorities of civil affairs and organized by neighborhood committees, with cooperation by relevant authorities and extensive participation of the people". The said "Opinions" also cover community education, pointing out, "It is required to organize diversified, healthy and beneficial activities of culture, sports, popular science, education and entertainment, by taking full advantage of existing cultural stations, function rooms and community plazas in the neighborhood. It is required to promote socialist ethical civilization and to advocate a scientific, civilized and healthy lifestyle by means of publicity columns and blackboard newspapers in the community. And it is required to strengthen the socialist, political, ideological, scientific and cultural education for community members, fostering a healthy, positive, civilized and harmonious atmosphere of community culture." The existing problem, however, is that the educational authorities have the sources but not the powers in community education, while the authorities of civil affairs do not have many resources in that regard although they can rely on community organizations for the task. In an ideal scenario, community education should be managed mainly by the educational authorities, with the cooperation of the authorities of civil affairs and the participation of other authorities.

The construction of a community education system actually involves the establishment of both an external and an internal system, which should be the first problem to be addressed. The external system is to be established on the national level, while the internal one concerns about the division of internal duties. In view of the current situations, the empowerment in the construction of both the external and the internal systems requires the "pilot test" by authorities with good ideas, suitable approaches and adequate abilities. They should actively grasp the opportunities and lay a solid foundation for community education. In the game of administrative powers, there can be a great difference between "doing something" and "doing nothing".

From the division of administrative powers, community education, as a form of imparting knowledge, should certainly fall into the jurisdiction of the educational authorities, which then have the discretion to assign the specific duties to either their local subsidiaries or RTVUs. By transferring the "Research & Training Center for Community Education" to the CRTVU, the MOE actually authorizes some duties of community education to the institution.

The way to the healthy development of community education lies in the "rule of law" in education. In other words, it is impossible to really promote the healthy and orderly development of community education without the legal guarantees by the country. The key problems in community education include the lack of specific duties among government departments, orderless implementation and failure to effectively integrate relevant resources, thus resulting in both separate and repeated construction of projects and severe waste of resources at the same time.

Upon addressing the administrative powers, we then need to consider how community education should be carried out, which is actually the precondition to the task. To be specific, we should regard local residents as "players" in community education. It not only provides a new idea at work but also involves the empowerment in social management. And practice in that regard is in

fact conducive to the innovation of social management as a whole.

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