

Challenges of Adult Education in China: A Review

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Abstract

This literature review examined the situation of adult education in China, using Knowles' Andragogy Theory and an assessment of legislation, policies, and challenges to adult learning. Knowles' approach emphasizes the value of self-directed, experiential learning, which is critical for adult learners. In China, the government has implemented laws such as the "Lifelong Education Law" to encourage continual learning, although considerable problems remain. These include insufficient finance, out-of-date curricula, restricted access to educational resources, and social attitudes that devalue adult education. Therefore, this review emphasized the need for policy refinement, creative teaching methods, and more investment in infrastructure and educator training. Addressing these difficulties is essential in developing a strong adult education system in China that encourages lifelong learning.

Keywords: Adult Education, Challenges, Literature Review

1. Introduction

With the development of society, adult education has attracted the attention of most adults. Research on the development trend and current situation of adult education is of great significance in promoting the development and quality of adult education (Mawarni et al., 2022). Adult education refers to an educational method that provides various forms of education and training activities to meet the learning needs of adults (Orozco & Berame, 2022). With the social economy growing quickly and science and technology continuing to advance, people's demand for knowledge and skills is increasing as well. As an essential way to meet the learning needs of adults, adult education has a wide range of application prospects and great development potential (Faradova, 2020).

In 1995, a law on education was introduced to implement an adult education system in China. Adult education refers to a practice in which adults participate in methodical and organized activities through which they can facilitate their understanding and learning (Kapur, 2019). The primary objective of adult education is to ensure individuals are able to increase their understanding in terms of various concepts. This type of education is one of the important elements in Chinese educational undertaking (Chang, 2001). China encourages the development of varied forms of adult education so that citizens may receive appropriate education in politics, economics, culture, science and technology and professional or life-long education (Education Law of the People's Republic of China, 1995). Statistics show that there are 962 independently established Chinese institutions of adult education with 200,390 faculty and staff members with over 400,000 secondary schools and 180,000 primary schools for adults (*Adult Education*, n.d.).

The main functions of adult education in China are as follows: 1). to provide education and training of cultural knowledge, professional skills and practical ability for those who have become part of the

workforce or those who may switch to new jobs and those jobseekers who have not met job requirements; 2). to provide literacy for the illiterates; 3. to continuously provide basic or higher education for those who have left formal schools, taking into consideration their cultural basis and actual needs. Graduation Certificates are issued to those who are qualified; 4). to provide continuous education for those professional technical or management personnel who have received higher education, with the purpose of renewing and enriching their knowledge and enhancing their ability; and 5). to conduct diversified education of social culture or living, activities such as elementary knowledge of law, health of women and children, health of senior citizens, family life, fine art/calligraphy, beauty care, cooking/nutrition, flower-planting, etc.; to provide educational service of a civilized, healthy, and scientific lifestyle for the elders, women and all citizens (*Adult Education*, n.d.).

Thus, adult education in China encompasses various programs and initiatives designed to provide continuing education opportunities to adults. These programs aim to improve literacy, vocational skills, and professional qualifications. With this definition, adult learning is a catalyst for personal development, career advancement and societal progress (Erdeia & Tepericsa, 2014).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Knowles' Andragogy Theory

In the 1970s, Malcolm Knowles (1913 – 1997) was an American educator well known for the use of the term andragogy as synonymous to adult education. According to Knowles, andragogy is the art and science of adult learning, thus andragogy refers to any form of adult learning (Kearsley, 2010). Alexander Kapp, a German educator, first used the term andragogy in 1833.

Knowles made five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners. First is the self-concept wherein as a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being. Second is the experience of the adult learner wherein he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning. Third is the readiness to learn that becomes increasingly oriented to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles. Fourth is the orientation to learning wherein a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Fifth is the motivation to learn wherein the processing learning is internal (Knowles 1984).

In 1984, Knowles suggested 4 principles that are applied to adult learning: 1). Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. 2). Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities. 3). Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented (Kearsley, 2010).

2.2. Adult Learning in China

China's cultural and historical context profoundly influences its approach to education and adult learning. Traditional Chinese values have historically emphasized the importance of adult education as pathways to personal and societal advancement (Zhao & Guo, 2020). In recent decades, China's rapid economic development and globalization have underscored the necessity for continuous learning to remain competitive in a knowledge-based economy (Wang & Huang, 2019). The government's emphasis on building a learning society has led to significant investments in education and training programs tailored to adults (Yang & Yan, 2020). These initiatives align with broader global trends towards adult learning

and the recognition of education as a critical driver of social and economic progress.

The aim of adult education is to enable all citizens with the ability to live, work and labor to realize all-round development through developing their personal resources, improving their knowledge and skills and optimizing their personality in accordance with different needs in life, work and learning (Xie, 2003). Adult education targets all citizens. The society, the state and governments at all levels should advocate and publicize the idea of adult learning and provide educational facilities to meet the needs of adult learners, help them utilize various learning resources and create an ideal social environment for adult learning.

The Chinese government has been attaching high importance to the development of adult education and making a series of important policies to promote the development of China's adult education. In the Decision on the Reform and Development of Adult Education issued in June 1987, it is clearly pointed out that: "Adult education is an important part of the whole educational cause. In the whole educational course, adult education enjoys the same importance as basic education, vocational and technical education and regular higher education." In the Decision on the Further Reform and Development of Higher Education for Adults in 1993, it is put forward that: "Various social forces should be mobilized to support and promote the development of various forms of higher education for adults at different levels, and to further strengthen and enlarge the opportunities and channels for all citizens to receive higher education." In the Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China 1993, it is stated that adult education, as a new type of education, is to develop traditional school education into adult education, and that energetic efforts have to be made to develop vocational and adult education at various levels.

In the Education Law of the People's Republic of China 1995, it is clearly emphasized that the state implements the adult education system in which it encourages the development of different forms of adult education to enable all citizens to receive appropriate professional and adult education in the fields of politics, economics, culture, science and technology. An adult education system should be established and improved step by step. All these provisions have guaranteed the legitimate position of adult education and promoted the development of adult education. Moreover, the Chinese government has also adopted a series of other important documents such as "Action Program for Vitalizing Education for the 21st Century" and "Decision on Deepening Educational Reform and Promoting Competence Education", emphasizing the "fundamental establishment" and "gradual improvement" of an adult education and learning system. Obviously, this shows that the Chinese government has deepened the understanding of adult education in view of the strategy of national development in the new century.

At the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in 2001, the development of adult education and promotion of citizens' all-round development were made one of the objectives of the nation's "overall construction of a well-off society". As an important part of the adult learning system and a key means for realizing a learning-based society, adult education is believed to enjoy faster development (Xie, 2003).

2.3. Challenges in the Pursuit of Adult Learning

Despite the perceived benefits of adult learning, Chinese alumni encounter various challenges that hinder their participation. Socio-economic problems, geographical restrictions, and family responsibilities often limit access to educational opportunities, particularly for individuals from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Wang & Wang, 2018). Moreover, competing demands on time and resources, such as work commitments and familial obligations, pose significant challenges for adult learners seeking to balance their educational pursuits with other responsibilities (Sun, 2019). Additionally, systemic

barriers within educational institutions, including rigid curricula, limited program offerings, and insufficient support services, may discourage alumni from engaging in adult learning activities (Wang & Zhu, 2020).

Growth and overall development of adult education is one of the core educations as an ongoing process throughout the person's lifetime. However, from our adult education policy involving text content point of view, the adult education as as vocational skills training and job-oriented training tends to be obvious. Its basic purpose is to develop national construction trades training. This practical, utilitarian feature, apparently with the international community based on education, public welfare and welfare objectives, such as expanded adult education, is different. Since college enrollment, this biased educational philosophy and positioning is particularly striking, negative impact is obvious. A common higher education enrollment of the adult education enrollment has a huge impact. A sharp drop in the overall education of students, students are increasingly distributed internal imbalances, popular professional Fortunately, the general professional unsustainable popular professional few. Currently, adult education mainly depends on top high equipment, teachers and all forces to school, thus leading to poor school conditions, lack of human and financial resources put into it, even adult education as a means of income generation. The adult education and non-academic education structure is irrational, the proportion of academic education is too high, the intensity of the nonacademic education is not enough, and it is not conducive to an adult learning system (Yu, 2014).

The course structure aging, uneven quality of teaching curriculum development and practice of the adult education needs significant discord, theoretical knowledge too much, too little practical knowledge of the structure of a single course, knowledge is divided too small, most of the adult education courses in subjects still system construction, curriculum, textbooks were not reflected the characteristics of the adult education. According to the survey: only 2.1% of the adult students in the school curriculum structure should consider maintaining the status quo, but more than 56% of the students believe that teaching materials should be enhanced, advanced and practical (Yu, 2014).

3. Conclusion

Adult education in China has both possibilities and problems as it strives to grow and improve. Based on Knowles' Andragogy Theory, which emphasizes the need of self-directed learning and practical experience for adult learners, it is obvious that educational methodologies must be adjusted to fit the unique requirements of adult students. However, despite supporting legislation and regulations such as the "Lifelong Education Law" and efforts encouraging lifelong learning, several challenges persist. Adult education has several problems, including insufficient finance, obsolete teaching techniques, restricted access to resources, and cultural views that reduce the importance of adult education.

To address these challenges, policies on adult education must be refined further, more inventive and adaptable teaching methodologies implemented, and more investment in both infrastructure and instructor training. Addressing these difficulties needs a concerted effort from the government, educational institutions, and society to create an environment in which adult learning is accessible, appreciated, and encouraged. Future research should focus on building sustainable adult education models, particularly through digital platforms, to enable equal access throughout China.

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