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Structural Mismatch in the Teaching Workforce for Older Adult Education and Its Optimization Strategies: A Demand-Classification Perspective

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of population aging, older adult education has emerged as a crucial pathway for actively responding to demographic aging and improving the lifelong education system, with its quality fundamentally contingent upon the teaching workforce. Drawing upon McClusky's Categories of Need Theory as its theoretical lens, this study categorizes learning needs into five levels-coping, expressive, contributive, influence, and transcendence-and employs this framework to examine the current state of teaching supply. The findings reveal four primary issues within the teaching workforce: insufficient professionalization, lagging occupational status, inadequate stabilization, and a structural supply-demand mismatch. Most notably, the structural mismatch stands out as the most prominent issue: teaching supply is concentrated at the foundational level, with insufficient responsiveness to higher-order needs such as contributive, influence, and transcendence needs. The underlying causes include fragmented management systems, unstable funding, outdated industry standards, and biased social perceptions. Accordingly, this study proposes an integrated optimization strategy encompassing "system improvement, professional enhancement, safeguard consolidation, training innovation, and demand-responsive provision," advocating for precisely targeted capacity building based on demand classification to promote the high-quality development of older adult education.

1. Introduction

As of the end of 2025, the population aged 60 and above in China reached 323.38 million, accounting for 23.0% of the total population [1], making population aging a fundamental demographic reality of the country's social development. With the deepening of population aging, the proportion of the working-age population has continued to decline, placing sustained pressure on public services such as elderly care, medical care, and long-term care. Meanwhile, older adults' demands for spiritual and cultural enrichment, social participation, and self-actualization have grown rapidly, objectively necessitating a systematic societal response to population aging across economic, governance, and cultural dimensions.

At present, China has elevated actively responding to population aging to the status of a national

strategy, integrating the concepts of "active aging and healthy aging" into the entire process of economic and social development. Older adult education serves as a vital pathway for actively responding to population aging and achieving healthy and harmonious aging, playing an irreplaceable role in enriching older adults' spiritual and cultural lives and advancing the development of the lifelong education system.

Teachers are key to older adult education. The professional competence, teaching capacity, and professional commitment of the teaching workforce directly determine the quality and attractiveness of older adult education. However, constrained over the long term by multiple factors-including management systems, industry standards, and social perceptions-the teaching workforce in older adult education continues to exhibit notable shortcomings in professionalization, occupational status, and stabilization, making it difficult to meet the increasingly diverse learning needs of older adult learners.

2. Main Problems Confronting the Teaching Workforce in Older Adult Education

At present, the teaching workforce in older adult education in China primarily consists of three components: full-time teachers, part-time teachers, and volunteer teachers. Full-time teachers refer to those who are exclusively engaged in older adult education, generally drawn from institutions such as local universities for older adults, open universities, and community colleges. This group is the smallest in number and assumes a backbone role. They are involved in both frontline teaching and teaching management and organization, effectively embodying a dual identity of "teacher plus administrator." Part-time teachers are primarily individuals from various sectors of society who are compensated for their services. This group exhibits high mobility and draws from a wide range of sources, including experts and professors from universities and research institutions, retirees from enterprises and public institutions, skilled craftspeople from various trades, in-service teachers or employees, and freelancers. Volunteer teachers serve as an important supplement to the teaching workforce. They typically participate in older adult education out of a passion for serving society rather than for the purpose of earning income. Their sources mainly include retirees, university students, community residents with specialized expertise, and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. Given the complexity of the teaching workforce in older adult education, four primary issues currently characterize this workforce in China: insufficient professionalization, lagging occupational status, inadequate stabilization, and a supply-demand mismatch.

2.1 Weak Professional Foundation and Uneven Teaching Capacity

2.1.1 Imbalanced Workforce Structure and an Insecure Professional Foundation

Constrained by staffing quotas and remuneration levels, the teaching workforce comprises fewer full-time and more part-time [2], with professionally trained teachers being even scarcer; consequently, courses rely heavily on part-time teachers and volunteers for support. Graduates specializing in older adult education are extremely rare, and part-time teachers, who mostly come from various sectors of society, vary considerably in their professional backgrounds and teaching capacity, with some possessing an insufficient understanding of the physical and psychological characteristics of older adults.

2.1.2 An Underdeveloped Training System and Insufficient Support for Professional Growth

Phenomena such as pre-service training reduced to a mere formality, fragmented in-service training, and the scarcity of advanced training programs are widespread. A standardized curriculum system tailored to the distinctive characteristics of older adult education has yet to be established,

and specialized training programs designed specifically for the teaching workforce in older adult education remain absent, thereby impeding the professional growth of this workforce.

2.1.3 Weak Capacity for Teaching and Research and Severe Homogenization of Instruction

Many teachers lack the awareness and capacity to elevate practical experience into theoretical outcomes. Most courses remain at the level of "talent-oriented" or "entertainment-oriented" instruction, with insufficient capacity to respond precisely to the individualized needs of older adult learners, resulting in limited attempts to translate practical experience into research outcomes.

2.2 Absent Institutional Safeguards and Ambiguous Occupational Identity

2.2.1 Fragmented Management System and Unclear Boundaries of Authority and Responsibility

In some regions of China, older adult education currently exhibits a fragmented, multi-administrator governance structure, often referred to as a "nine dragons managing the water" scenario. Community colleges fall under the jurisdiction of education bureaus, while older adult education is concurrently undertaken by community colleges and open universities, with civil affairs departments also involved in administration. This fragmented management system makes it difficult to delineate clear boundaries of authority and responsibility, thereby increasing the likelihood of duplication and omission in the delivery of older adult education.

2.2.2 Unclear Division of Labor and Full-time Teachers Bearing Multiple Responsibilities

The current shortage of full-time teachers in older adult education in China often results in many of them having to undertake frontline teaching while simultaneously attending to multiple other tasks, including administration, research, publicity, security, and statistics. With multiple responsibilities imposed upon them, these teachers find it difficult to concentrate on teaching, which in turn affects instructional effectiveness.

2.2.3 Blocked Promotion Pathways and Absent Career Development Trajectories

Many regions have yet to establish explicit regulations regarding teacher qualifications, job responsibilities, and performance evaluation, resulting in considerable flexibility in the enforcement of institutional rules and a weak institutional foundation for the professionalization of the teaching workforce [3].

2.3 Insufficient Remuneration and High Workforce Mobility

2.3.1 Low Salaries and Benefits and Insufficient Occupational Attractiveness

The overall salary level of teachers in older adult education lags significantly behind that of their counterparts in public primary and secondary schools and higher education institutions, making it difficult to establish the profession's appeal as a career. Influenced by traditional perceptions, older adult education is frequently regarded as mere "leisure and entertainment," thereby weakening teachers' sense of occupational achievement. Affected by the cumulative effects of the aforementioned factors, full-time teachers in private institutions frequently change jobs, while those in public institutions are often seconded to other departments.

2.3.2 High Workforce Turnover and Precarious Stability

The defining characteristic of part-time teachers and volunteer teachers is that they "have a primary occupation," lacking institutional anchors. Consequently, when this work conflicts with their primary occupation or is disrupted by other reasons, withdrawal becomes a natural outcome. This "temporary" nature results in a high turnover state in which members "come quickly and leave quickly."

2.4 Supply-Demand Mismatch: The Teaching Workforce's Inadequate Response to Learners' Diverse Needs

McClusky classified the needs of older adults into five levels: Coping Needs, Expressive Needs, Contributive Needs, Influence Needs, and Transcendence Needs [4]. Examining the current teaching supply through the lens of this need hierarchy reveals a pronounced structural mismatch.

2.4.1 Adequacy at the Foundational Level and Deficiency at the Higher Level

Currently, most teachers are capable of delivering courses that address "coping needs," such as smartphone use, fraud prevention, and health preservation. However, when it comes to courses that fulfill "contributive needs" and "influence needs"-which require activating learners' life experience, encouraging social contribution, and facilitating participation in public affairs-the teaching workforce is notably underprepared.

2.4.2 A Pronounced Skill-Transmission Orientation and Insufficient Spiritual Guidance

Most current courses in older adult education remain at the level of "teaching skills," providing an insufficient response to the "transcendence needs" of older adult learners, namely, helping them to seek meaning in life and achieve self-transcendence.

2.4.3 Insufficient Attention to Group Differentiation

In some regions, the teaching workforce generally exhibits a weak capacity for differentiated instruction tailored to older adults of varying ages, cultural backgrounds, and health conditions. Many courses adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, making it difficult to accommodate the diverse learning motivations of older adults. The aforementioned mismatches directly result in some older adult learners leaving immediately upon course completion, making it difficult to foster long-term learning engagement. This, in turn, constrains the transformation and upgrading of older adult education from an "activity-oriented" model to a "learning-oriented" one, and ultimately to a "growth-oriented" one.

3. Analysis of Underlying Causes

3.1 Fragmented Management System

Older adult education involves multiple departments, including education, civil affairs, aging affairs, organizational affairs, finance, and human resources and social security, yet it lacks a unified coordinating body and top-level design. Each department formulates policies, allocates resources, and manages its own personnel independently, resulting in fragmented approaches to key processes such as teacher entry, training, evaluation, and promotion, which makes it difficult to form a cohesive force for professional development. The fragmented management system also means that the precise allocation of the teaching workforce from a demand-classification perspective lacks

institutional support: without a unified mechanism for monitoring demand, there is no basis for precisely matching teachers to needs.

3.2 Unstable Funding Guarantees

Older adult education possesses a strong public welfare orientation, yet its funding sources are predominantly government fiscal allocations, with limited channels for social participation. In some regions, funding for older adult education has yet to be separately itemized as it has for community education, and dedicated funds lack stable guarantees. Consequently, improvements in teacher remuneration, the expansion of training, and the development of platforms are all constrained by funding bottlenecks, undermining the stability and growth of the teaching workforce. Insufficient funding also directly restricts the development of courses that address higher-order needs and the cultivation of teachers capable of delivering them.

3.3 Biased Social Perceptions

Influenced by traditional perceptions, older adult education is frequently regarded as mere "pastime" or "leisure and entertainment," and is not fully recognized as an integral component of the lifelong education system and a vital pathway for achieving active and healthy aging. This cognitive bias leads to insufficient societal attention and uneven quality among enrolled learners, which in turn weakens the occupational attractiveness of teaching in this field and indirectly diminishes public understanding and overall attention. This cognitive bias further marginalizes higher-order educational objectives-such as contributive needs, influence needs, and transcendence needs-making it naturally difficult for teaching workforce development to orient itself toward these directions.

4. Optimization Strategies

4.1 Improving the Management System and Clarifying the Boundaries of Authority and Responsibility

It is recommended that a joint conference system for teaching workforce development be established at the district level, led by the district leader in charge and involving departments of education, civil affairs, aging affairs, organizational affairs, finance, and human resources and social security. Under this system, the education department assumes responsibility for professional guidance and quality supervision, the finance department for funding guarantees, and the human resources and social security department for professional title evaluation and the implementation of remuneration. Civil affairs and aging affairs departments play a coordinating and supporting role. Concurrently, a teaching workforce development center should be established at the district level, teaching workforce service stations in each subdistrict and town, and teaching workforce liaison points at the community level, thereby forming a well-connected and responsive management and service network. A checklist-based approach to responsibility management should be adopted to eliminate "management vacuums" and "overlapping jurisdictions."

4.2 Strengthening Professional Development and Enhancing Workforce Quality

The government should follow the principle of "full-time teachers as the backbone, part-time teachers as the support, and volunteers as the supplement," and adjust the ratio of full-time to part-time personnel through open recruitment, targeted training, and talent introduction. Emphasis

should be placed on attracting "dual-qualified" teachers-those proficient in both disciplinary knowledge and the pedagogy of older adult education-as well as outstanding graduates specializing in relevant fields from higher education institutions. Efforts should also be made to establish explicit requirements regarding educational background, specialization, age, and professional competence, and to progressively implement a "certification-based employment" system. For instance, an independent professional title series for community (older adult) education teachers could be established, comprising four promotion tiers-assistant, lecturer, associate professor, and professor-so that full-time teachers have "a viable path for career development." Given that learners in older adult education possess rich life experience and distinctive physical and psychological characteristics, teachers must not only command disciplinary knowledge but also demonstrate a sense of responsibility, patience, and educational commitment. Accordingly, professional ethics and educational commitment should be incorporated as compulsory components of teacher training [5].

4.3 Improving Incentive and Safeguard Mechanisms to Invigorate the Workforce

Following the principles of "pay according to work, more pay for more work, and better pay for better performance," efforts should be made to progressively raise the salary and benefit levels of community (older adult) education teachers and narrow the income gap between them and teachers in public primary and secondary schools, so that teachers have "something to strive for." In collaboration with human resources and social security departments, efforts should be made to promote the establishment of an independent professional title evaluation system, so that outstanding teachers have "something to look forward to." Social insurance, paid training, and paid leave should be provided to create an environment conducive to teaching with peace of mind and dedication.

4.4 Innovating Training Models and Enhancing Professional Competence

Differentiated training programs should be designed for distinct groups, including newly recruited teachers, backbone teachers, administrators, and volunteers: pre-service training should focus on norms and fundamentals, backbone training on methods and innovation, administrative training on philosophy and leadership, and volunteer training on teaching techniques and service standards. Full advantage should be taken of lifelong learning public service platforms to develop online training resources and to normalize blended "online plus offline" training. This enables teachers, through the vehicles of research projects, project-based collaboration, and teaching-research activities, to form cross-institutional and cross-regional learning communities that regularly conduct lesson study, action research, and experience exchange, thereby fostering a favorable atmosphere of "learning through research, researching through practice, and achieving through doing."

4.5 Precisely Responding to the Diverse Needs of Older Adult Learners Based on Demand Classification

To address the "supply-demand mismatch," the Categories of Need Theory is drawn upon to systematically enhance the teaching workforce's capacity for precisely targeted instruction across five levels. At the level of coping needs, teachers should be equipped to deliver practical courses closely tied to daily life, with an emphasis on helping older adult learners solve real problems in their everyday lives. At the level of expressive needs, emphasis should be placed on developing courses that cultivate personal interests, encouraging older adult learners to showcase their individual talents and life experiences and to achieve self-expression. At the level of contributive

needs, a "volunteer teacher database for older adults" should be established to guide older adult learners in applying what they have learned to community service, peer mutual assistance, and the transmission of experience, thereby translating the vision of "productive aging" into practice and making the teaching process itself an act of contributing back to society. At the level of influence needs, teachers should be trained to organize participatory courses such as deliberative consultation, community-based research, and simulated civic participation, enabling older adult learners to acquire practical experience in influencing their families, communities, and public affairs through learning. At the level of transcendence needs, teachers should be encouraged to develop in-depth courses such as life education, philosophical reading, art appreciation, and intergenerational dialogue, guiding older adult learners to explore the meaning of life and achieve spiritual growth.

5. Conclusion

The professionalization of the teaching workforce in older adult education is an intrinsic requirement for actively responding to population aging and building a learning society. Multiple constraints—management systems, funding guarantees, industry standards, and social perceptions—underlie the problems currently confronting the teaching workforce in terms of management, structure, competence, and incentives. These problems must be addressed through sustained institutional reform, systematic enhancement of professional competence, effective implementation of safeguards and incentives, and continuous innovation in training models. As McClusky's Categories of Need Theory indicates, the learning motivations of older adults are stratified and diverse; consequently, capacity building for the teaching workforce should likewise become stratified and precisely targeted. Only in this way can older adult education move beyond "passing the time" toward "self-actualization".

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