

Exploration and Experience of Implementing High-quality After-school Services in Less-developed Regions and in China—Taking Wuhua County, Meizhou City as an Example

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Abstract: *The prerequisite for building an educational powerhouse is basic education. Carrying out after-school services for primary and secondary school students is an important measure to implement the "double reduction" policy and promote the healthy growth of students. A number of advanced practices and typical cases have emerged in after-school service work in China. Among them, Guangdong Education Publishing House has explored an integrated after-school service solution of "platform+course+service" based on the actual needs and specific practices of after-school services in Wuhua County, Meizhou City, providing many inspirations for the effective implementation of after-school services in China. The article introduces the achievements and experiences of Guangdong Education Publishing House in exploring the development path of high-quality after-school services from three aspects: the construction of after-school service platforms, the research and development of quality-oriented courses and supporting services, and full on-site operation services.*

Keywords: *China; Less-developed regions; After-school services; Primary and secondary schools; Platform; Course; Service*

1. Introduction

Wuhua County, Meizhou City, is located in the northeast of Guangdong Province, China, upstream of the Hanjiang River. It is part of the hilly area in east Kwongtung, with a total area of 3238.9 square kilometers and 16 towns. By the end of 2020, the registered residence population of the whole county will be 1524,184, with the urban and rural population accounting for 30.9% and 69.1% respectively. In 2020, Wuhua County achieved a regional GDP of 16.297 billion (yuan) and an education financial allocation of 2.18 billion (yuan).

In 2018, the Wuhua County Government formulated the Implementation Measures for On-campus and After-school Services for Primary and Secondary School Students in Wuhua County, establishing a mechanism for on-campus and after-school services led by the government, coordinated by departments, under the main responsibility of schools, with social participation and parental support. On the basis of in-depth research and extensive and comprehensive solicitation of opinions from all walks of life, the Education Bureau of Wuhua County decided to take the lead in carrying out "Internet+" after-school services in east Kwongtung region. Through public bidding, Guangdong Education Publishing House, a state-owned educational and cultural publishing enterprise in Guangdong Province, won the qualification of after-school service platform operator.

Since the autumn semester of 2020, Guangdong Education Publishing House has launched after-school services in primary and secondary schools in Wuhua County. Over the past three years and six semesters, more than 40,000 students have been served, and more than 50 types of after-school service quality-oriented courses have been launched. The First Primary School of Wuhua County has successfully been selected as one of the first 12 typical case schools implementing the "double reduction" policy by the Department of Education of Guangdong Province. The after-school service work has achieved good social benefits and created a development model for the implementation of county-level after-school service projects.

2. Basic situation of compulsory education in Wuhua County

According to the 14th Five Year Plan for Education Development in Wuhua County, there are a total of 424 compulsory education schools in the 2020-2021 academic year, including 160 complete primary schools, 220 teaching points, 35 junior high schools, and 9 nine-year integrated schools. There are 8,702 full-time teachers in the compulsory education stage. Among them, there are 5,567 primary school teachers and 3,135 junior high school teachers. There are 150,069 students enrolled in compulsory education, including 102,747 primary school students and 47,322 junior high school students^[1].

The distribution of compulsory education resources in Wuhua County is uneven between urban and rural areas, mainly manifested as a high proportion of rural schools, scattered distribution, and widespread problems such as insufficient software and hardware facilities, and incomplete allocation of music, sports, and art teachers. The organization and implementation of after-school service work face the following five difficulties:

2.1 Insufficient facilities and infrastructure

Due to the backwardness and inadequacy of school infrastructure construction, some schools in Wuhua County, especially rural schools, lack after-school service facilities and well-equipped functional classrooms, which cannot meet the diverse development needs of students. For example, many rural schools are not equipped with standard indoor and outdoor sports facilities, and lack fully equipped functional classrooms, laboratories, student activity centers, etc. Sports equipment, experimental equipment, and library resources are relatively scarce. The insufficient hardware facilities severely limit the space and richness of after-school services.

2.2 Lacking course resources

Due to the insufficient school-based curriculum and the lack of organizational guidance for introducing non-disciplinary extracurricular training institutions, after-school services in primary and secondary schools in Wuhua County are generally facing the embarrassing situation of "cooking without rice"^[2]. There are problems with the quantity, quality, and structure of science, safety, and suitability courses that cannot effectively support teachers in carrying out quality-oriented course teaching. Many schools' after-school services simply stay at the basic level of tutoring students to complete homework, and cannot effectively carry out independent reading, sports, art, and science popularization activities. It is difficult to organize entertainment games, outward bound, film appreciation, interesting clubs and group activities, which cannot truly cultivate students' interests and talents, promote their comprehensive development, and the quality of after-school services is difficult to guarantee.

2.3 Imperfect teacher structure

On the one hand, many schools in Wuhua County have an imperfect teacher structure, insufficient staffing, and a general lack of teachers in music, sports, and aesthetics; On the other hand, full-time teachers have heavy subject teaching tasks and are unable to undertake the preparation tasks for after-school service quality-oriented courses. They also generally lack teaching experience in after-school service quality-oriented courses. Therefore, it is difficult to ensure the richness, professionalism, and effectiveness of after-school services.

2.4 Incomplete system construction

In the early stages of implementing after-school services in primary and secondary schools in Wuhua County, there were generally problems with inadequate institutional construction, organizational management, and supporting measures^[3]. The implementation of after-school services in various schools faced significant difficulties and often get half the results with double the effort.

2.5 Difficulty in introducing resources

Due to the lack of established standards for non-disciplinary extracurricular training institutions and methods for reviewing the quality of extracurricular courses, as well as the absence of qualified

personnel for course content review, Compulsory Education Schools in Wuhua County faced a dilemma in the process of providing after-school services. These schools urgently needed to introduce extracurricular resources to make up for the shortage of school-based resources, but were forced to give up due to the prevention of ideological security risks.

3. Measures taken by Guangdong Education Publishing House to assist Wuhua County in providing high-quality after-school services

Based on the local actual conditions in Wuhua County, Guangdong Education Publishing House has explored an integrated after-school service solution of "platform+course+service"^[4]. This solution plan can promote the digitization of after-school service management, and empower all parties involved in after-school services to reduce their burden by relying on the "Southern Education Media" on-campus after-school service management platform. The professional and talent advantages of Education Publishing House can be fully utilized to create a systematic and scientific after-school service curriculum system, and to provide complete teacher and student resources for each course, thereby creating a source of vitality for after-school services. In addition, a full-time on-site service model can be established to provide comprehensive support for after-school services and promote the improvement and efficiency of after-school services.

3.1 Build a 'Southern Education Media' on-campus after-school service management platform

Guangdong Education Publishing House launched the research and development of an information platform for after-school services on-campus in the first half of 2018, and developed the "Southern Education Media" after-school service management platform with independent intellectual property rights. The platform has obtained a total of 12 computer software copyrights and has also obtained the third-level qualification for information system security protection from the Ministry of Public Security^[5]. The platform landed in Wuhua County, Meizhou City in August 2020.

The 'Southern Education Media' on-campus after-school service management platform has opened multiple ports for education authorities, schools, teachers, parents, students, institutions, and backend control, with over 100 functions including review, statistics, academic affairs, supervision, and settlement. It has achieved a business closed loop in the management of the bidding platform and institution whitelist, review of bad information, complaint handling, seamless integration with the national after-school service platform, and confirmation of information reporting. The implementation and operation of the platform plays out five major advantages: It can effectively assist the education department in the full-process supervision of after-school services, and provide strong support for the education department to make decisions on after-school services based on the platform's big data; It is helpful to support parents' online registration consultation, course selection, meal ordering, leave application, payment, refund, and evaluation, etc.; Teachers can use this online platform to achieve online attendance and roll call, view class schedules, evaluate students, showcase classroom style, handle parents' complaints, account for classroom class fees, and more; It can empower schools to comprehensively manage third-party institutions and food distribution organizations, supervise the quality of teachers' teaching, and ensure the safety and quality of after-school services. By integrating with the national smart education platform, this platform can match massive learning resources to support local high-quality resource sharing and achieve one-click operation for resource introduction and output.

3.2 Develop well-rounded courses that combine five-education and improve supporting services

Currently, after-school service courses are mostly developed from a publishing perspective, neglecting the educational perspective and failing to pay attention to the core needs of education and teaching. Many courses are difficult to truly implement. In addition, the development of after-school service courses relies more on renowned teachers from prestigious universities, educational research institutions, or experts and scholars from universities and colleges. The participation of front-line teachers at the grassroots level is low, and the participation of schools in second, third, and fourth tier cities is also low. The courses lack universality and are prone to being "out of place". In view of the above situation, in order to enhance the adaptability of the curriculum and ensure the effectiveness of its implementation, Guangdong Education Publishing House has taken six measures^[6].

3.2.1 Establish the first county-level primary and secondary school after-school service teaching and research center in Wuhua County.

Guangdong Education Publishing House has selected 985/211 full-time master's students and personnel with intermediate professional titles to serve as the director of the after-school service teaching and research center in Wuhua County, and has established a local course research and development team to provide full process and full-time professional support for the development and implementation of course resources. Over the past three years, the after-school service teaching and research center in Wuhua County has focused on the fundamental task of cultivating students' moral character, with the values of teachers being able to teach, parents being satisfied, students liking, public welfare and inclusiveness, and being able to implement it. It has created more than 20 series of quality-oriented courses, covering five dimensions including character cultivation, language literacy, scientific literacy, physical literacy, and artistic literacy.

3.2.2 Promote education through research

The after-school service teaching and research center in Wuhua County led some outstanding teachers to explore characteristic cultural resources, talent resources, and school-based resources, and jointly completed the development of quality-oriented course resources such as "Charm Basketball", "Fun Football", "English Picture Books", "Fun Magic Cube", "Little Chorus", etc. It has fully stimulated the enthusiasm and initiative of teachers, deepened their understanding of well-rounded education, and laid a solid foundation for better carrying out quality-oriented course teaching.

3.2.3 Combine teaching with learning

Guangdong Education Publishing House takes into account the learning and growth patterns of students and the teaching needs of teachers, providing complete student and teacher resources for each quality-oriented course. Around the course content, it provides students with learning material packages, video explanations, etc., provides teachers with complete course execution plans and electronic courseware, empower students to learn and explore independently, help teachers quickly master the teaching ability of quality-oriented courses and improve teaching level, and ensure the effective implementation of quality-oriented courses.

3.2.4 Carry out professional teacher training to enhance teachers' teaching abilities

Guangdong Education Publishing House has provided application training and on-demand training for teachers in Wuhua County. Application training is a centralized and unified training aimed at teachers in the entire county, tailored to the common needs of various schools. Its purpose is to quickly train teachers who are capable of teaching quality-oriented courses for each school; On-demand training is a program tailored to the personalized needs of individual schools, aimed at helping schools create distinctive after-school service courses. In addition, Guangdong Education Publishing House also provides guidance for teachers in Wuhua County to conduct research projects, write papers, publish monographs, and receive professional title evaluation training, comprehensively assisting teachers in their individualized career development. Over the past three years, Guangdong Education Publishing House has provided in-depth training for teachers in primary and secondary schools in Wuhua County, covering more than 10 high-quality courses. Through scientifically rigorous training that combines theory with practice, it aims to promote teachers in Wuhua County to update their educational concepts and enhance their practical teaching abilities.

3.2.5 Organize student public welfare activities to benefit more students from the achievements of well-rounded education

In the summer of 2022, the after-school service teaching and research center of Wuhua County conducted free summer public welfare activities for primary and secondary school students in Wuhua County, benefiting nearly 2000 primary and secondary school students throughout the county. Among them, multiple courses such as "Fun Football", "Charm Basketball", "Fun Magic Cube", "English Picture Book", "Awakening Treasure Puzzle Thinking", "Creative Programming", "Scientific Thinking", "Hulusi", "Creative Clay Sculpture" were launched for the first time, creating a new form of synchronous public welfare activities in central primary schools, county affiliated schools, and some middle schools throughout the county. In addition, the activity named "five-education and self-reading bookshelf into campus" also helps students gain more knowledge about folk stories, social customs, local culture, space and nature, sports, ideological and moral aspects through reading.

3.2.6 Strictly implement the review of course materials and ensure ideological security

Guangdong Education Publishing House, in accordance with relevant regulations such as the Management Measures for Extracurricular Training Materials for Primary and Secondary School Students (Trial) issued by the Ministry of Education, has assisted the education authorities and schools in Wuhua County in developing a training course content review mechanism, management measures, and evaluation standards, organized national certified subject editors, strictly reviewed course materials, and ensured ideological safety.

3.3 On-site operation services

Guangdong Education Publishing House has paid attention to the front line of after-school services, setting up fixed office spaces in the service area, forming a dedicated team of resident administrators, carrying out after-school service teaching inspections, verifying and distributing teacher subsidies, distributing service materials, conducting satisfaction surveys with parents and students, thereby providing comprehensive assistance and guarantee for after-school services.

Over the past three years, the resident administrator team of Wuhua County has planned and implemented multiple quality-oriented education achievement display activities. Through various forms such as the "Well-rounded Education Carnival", "Sports Skills Challenge", and "Art Education Week", a platform for students to express themselves has been successfully established, which plays a positive role in showcasing the achievements of well-rounded education, popularizing the concept of well-rounded education, enhancing parents' understanding of after-school services, thus promoting home-school cooperation.

4. Experience of Guangdong Education Publishing House in assisting Wuhua County in developing high-quality after-school services

4.1 Develop a comprehensive and user-friendly management platform to create an effective tool for after-school service work

After-school service is a systematic project that requires the joint participation and collaborative efforts of the government, schools, and society. Therefore, an integrated platform that effectively links various resources is an important tool for carrying out after-school service work in various regions. Based on this, Guangdong Education Publishing House has developed an after-school service management platform named "Southern Education Media", realizing the whole process of after-school service intelligent, data, standardized and convenient, and forming a completed and scientific Internet education service supervision system.

4.2 Establish an education mechanism of student-centered, curriculum-based, and teacher-supported, enriching after-school service content and improving the quality of after-school services

After-school service is one of the measures to implement well-rounded education and build an education system that comprehensively cultivates morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor skills. There is a need to adhere to student-centered approach and focus on promoting students' comprehensive development and healthy growth. From this perspective, Guangdong Education Publishing House has focused on cultivating students' core competencies, organizing front-line teachers in primary and secondary schools, university experts and scholars, renowned coaches, artists, certified editors, and other personnel to establish a curriculum research and development team, optimizing the top-level design of courses, creating a complete system and rich content of after-school educational resources, conducting professional teacher training, connecting the entire process of teacher teaching, student learning, teacher-student exploration and curriculum compilation, comprehensively empowering students' quality growth and teacher teaching practices, which is significantly enlightened to some extent.

4.3 Full on-site service, multi-dimensional improvement of after-school service quality

The development of compulsory education requires collaborative education, promoting the formation of a joint force in family-school-society to educate students. The three parties should each

take their own responsibilities, work together in the same direction, and cooperate and complement each other. As a social force for providing after-school services, Guangdong Education Publishing House's close cooperation and collaborative efforts with schools, parents, and teachers are also worth considering. Firstly, in terms of school level, Guangdong Education Publishing House has customized "one school, one case" for schools, organized certified subject editors to assist schools in comprehensive review and control of admission course resources, assisted schools in establishing and improving after-school service management systems, thus promoting the improvement of after-school service quality and efficiency; Secondly, in terms of parental services, Guangdong Education Publishing House has provided professional course selection and registration guidance, platform operation guidance, and student learning feedback, reducing the burden on parents while helping them participate in their children's growth; Finally, in terms of teacher services, Guangdong Education Publishing House has played a good auxiliary role in providing teachers with courses and scheduling, developing teaching plans, verifying and distributing course fees. The practice of Guangdong Education Publishing House providing on-site services is a vivid manifestation of the collaborative cooperation in family-school-society, which is conducive to creating a good learning and growth environment and promoting the healthy development of students.

5. Conclusion and prospect

Since the release of the after-school service policy in 2017, significant achievements have been made in after-school service work across the country, effectively helping parents solve the problem of difficulty in picking up and dropping off students on time, enhancing people's sense of education and happiness, and playing a promoting role in cultivating students' core literacy and comprehensive development to adapt to the future society. At the same time, we must also be aware that there are still shortcomings and areas that need improvement in after-school services.

1) The collaboration and cooperation of family-school-society need to be further strengthened, the admission standards and regulatory systems for social resources need to be improved, and the channels for entering schools need to be further opened up.

2) The resources of after-school service courses need to be further enriched, and the standardization and systematicity of the courses urgently need to be strengthened.

3) The teaching staff for after-school services needs to be improved, and the standardization and professionalization of the teaching staff urgently need to be enhanced.

4) The uneven distribution of after-school service resources and the large urban-rural gap require greater attention to educational equity.

To solve the above problems, it requires the joint efforts of all parties involved to develop a combination of after-school service improvement measures.

Firstly, there must be a management system that is coordinated and guided by the education regulatory department. Including clear policy guidance, admission and exit mechanisms for social resources entering and exiting school services, quality standards for after-school services, assessment methods and evaluation feedback mechanisms. By improving institutional design and establishing clear quality system standards, all service providers are forced to enhance their service capabilities and improve service quality, thereby promoting the overall high-quality development of after-school services.

Secondly, it's crucial to accelerate the construction progress of "curriculum standardization" and "teacher standardization". There should be scientific course selection and admission standards, a sound review and management system for teacher resources, a clear external resource approval process, and a process based supervision and evaluation system. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the full-process supervision of after-school services, provide comprehensive guarantees, and provide rich and high-quality after-school services for students.

Thirdly, there should be a rich and high-quality, open and shared library of after-school service resources. Schools and related education departments can widely carry out after-school service course selection, organize and implement excellent course application, select quality-oriented courses, thus making after-school services more diverse and colorful. They should fully mobilize the enthusiasm and creativity of all parties, tap into various talent resources to participate in after-school services, and ensure the supply of high-quality teachers for after-school services. An open and shared after-school

service resource library need to be gradually established to continuously enrich well-rounded education resources, share excellent educational experiences, thereby ensuring that high-quality educational resources benefit all primary and secondary school students, promoting educational equity.

Finally, it is necessary to establish a good mechanism for the full integration of resources and collaborative efforts. Under the leadership of the government, all kinds of enterprises and public institutions take the initiative to empower, education experts offer advice and suggestions, and social forces actively participate in building a good ecosystem of after-school services, so as to lay a solid foundation for running education that people are satisfied with, and achieving a strong country in education, science and technology, and talent.

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