

Research on the Policy Agenda of Elderly Education Moving towards National Legislation from the Perspective of Multiple Streams Theory

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Abstract. In the new era, the concept of elderly education is gradually gaining acceptance. From the perspective of Multiple Streams Theory, abundant data not only reveal the severe challenges faced by elderly education but also become key indicators for measuring its development trend. The high public attention and focal events intertwined accelerate the prominence of problem streams. The attention of government departments to elderly education issues, the deep insights and unique suggestions of NPC deputies and experts and scholars provide rich intellectual resources for policy formulation. Additionally, the guidance of advanced party concepts, the solid guarantee of government administration according to law, and the widespread resonance of national emotions together constitute a strong driving force in the political stream. When the problem, policy, and political streams converge, the policy window opens accordingly, initiating a new chapter for the development of elderly education at the national legislative level.

Keywords: elderly education, educational legislation, lifelong education, multiple streams theory

1. Introduction

Elderly education not only disseminates knowledge about aging but also cultivates the public's ability to adapt to an aging society. It is an important social initiative [1]. Legislation aims to solve social problems arising in the process of aging, making the education system more adaptable to the development needs of an aging society [2]. Therefore, to effectively respond to the challenges of aging and promote harmonious and stable social development, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth examination and research on elderly education legislation.

2. The Adaptability of Multiple Streams Theory to Elderly Education Legislation in China

The core of the problem stream lies in the clear definition of the problem. This definition includes, but is not limited to, changes in systematic indicators, the occurrence of focal events, feedback evaluation after the implementation of existing policies, and budget constraints. When these conditions jointly affect a specific situation, creating an urgent need for intervention, that situation is defined as a problem and thus pushed to the core of the political agenda.

The policy stream involves the proposal of policy issues and the competition among policy solutions, usually appearing in various forms such as legislative proposals, public speeches, or private debates. During this stage, policymakers systematically collect and combine policy suggestions and alternative solutions, actively proposing different ideas and solutions to address policy issues.

The political stream focuses on analyzing political factors, including political stances, public opinion, trends in public sentiment, election politics, and the power dynamics among interest groups. If a potential solution aligns with current public opinion, gains the approval of interest groups, and is consistent with the development plans of legislative and administrative departments, the likelihood of that solution gaining support will significantly increase. This process highlights the central role of political dynamics in the decision-making mechanism.

When the problem, policy, and political streams intertwine with a specific social context, the "policy window" opens.

In short, the Multiple Streams Theory focuses on how policies move from being in a state of problem recognition into the view of public officials and ultimately transform into concrete policy actions. Therefore, when analyzing the legal issues related to elderly education in China, the Multiple Streams Theory demonstrates its unique applicability in both theoretical and practical aspects.

3. Analysis of Elderly Education Legislation in China Based on Multiple Streams Theory

3.1. Problem Stream

3.1.1. Data Indicators Describing the Problem

The results of the seventh national census show that the number of elderly people aged 60 and above in China has reached 264.02 million, accounting for 18.70% of the total population. Among this group, the number of elderly people aged 65 and above is as high as 190.64 million, accounting for 13.50%. It is predicted that by 2050, the number of elderly people in China will climb to approximately 487 million, accounting for about one-third of the total population. The aging population in China is accelerating, and the task of combating aging is becoming increasingly arduous.

The issue of elderly education is closely related to the “meta-problem” of aging. The growth of the elderly population triggers various issues related to elderly education. The aging population brings a large demand for elderly education, driving the transformation of educational methods and structures towards deeper socialization and marketization. Therefore, if the current education model is not changed and a comprehensive education system that integrates educational resources and enhances educational effectiveness is not established, the quality of elderly education in China will be greatly restricted. Thus, promoting the high-quality development of elderly education with new models has become imperative.

3.1.2. Focal Events Highlighting the Problem

In 2021, Fudan University took the lead in establishing the country’s first institution dedicated to aging research—the Institute on Aging. This institute aims to create a leading aging research platform domestically and gain international renown. By the end of 2023, the educational system of China’s universities for the elderly had been further improved. Meanwhile, the national public platform for elderly education had cumulatively launched 436,000 online courses, with a total duration of 4,089,000 minutes, fully demonstrating the vitality and vigor of elderly education.

Focal events act as catalysts for policy change. Especially in the internet age, the exposure and dissemination of focal events in online media rapidly expand their social influence and public awareness. Through online platforms and public opinion, citizens influence government attention, forming a new mode of political participation in the internet era. The aforementioned focal events have triggered widespread online discussion. Moreover, as a nation that values filial piety and family, elderly issues easily touch the sensitive nerves of the public. Children and members of the public who care about elderly education develop a psychological concern for such events. As public opinion continues to ferment, policymakers can promptly follow up, take policy actions, and continuously amplify social sentiments.

3.1.3. Reflection on Existing Policies

Currently, the management structure of elderly education in China appears relatively fragmented, lacking a leading supervisory department [3]. The regulatory responsibilities of elderly education are divided among multiple ministries, such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Health Commission. This fragmented management model has resulted in “serious departmental barriers and limited collaborative cooperation.” In the field of elderly education, multiple organizations such as the Office on Aging, the Committee on Aging, the Adult Education Guidance Committee, and cultural management departments are involved in management, each formulating their own management regulations. This decentralized management model to some extent restricts the effectiveness of administrative management.

In the development process of elderly education, there are significant differences in the functions and responsibilities allocated among different departments, and a lack of comprehensive coordination mechanisms. This situation often leads to unclear de facto responsibility allocation, making management appear diverse, but actual responsibilities remain ambiguous.

3.2. Policy Stream

3.2.1. Policy Community Proposes Policy Solutions

The opinions of government officials and internal policy researchers occupy a primary position within the policy community. Relevant government officials are direct participants in the policy-making process, and their policy views can directly enter the decision-making center. They are very familiar with their work areas, and when contradictions and problems arise in their work fields, they can often provide guiding opinions and suggestions based on their work experience [4].

Wei Feng, Deputy Director of the Heilongjiang Civil Affairs Department, suggested that the cancellation of establishment permits would lead to a complete opening of the elderly education market. Xu Sheng, Director of the Elderly Affairs Department of the Fujian Civil Affairs Department, pointed out that adjusting elderly education laws requires clarifying the responsibilities of various departments, defining the Civil Affairs Department's role in guidance and supervision, and establishing a comprehensive government regulatory system and third-party evaluation and assessment standards. The Director of the Social Welfare Department of the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau pointed out that strengthening supervision during and after events will be the most urgent issue.

3.2.2. *Joint Efforts of NPC Deputies and Experts*

In the process of promoting legislation for elderly education, academic experts and policy research teams are also actively advancing the work of elderly education legislation, injecting strong momentum into the legalization process in this field [5].

During the agenda of the Fifth Session of the 13th National People's Congress in 2022, Fang Lixu emphasized the importance of accelerating the promotion of elderly education policies nationwide. He advocated for the construction of a diversified education model and the deepening of elderly academic (degree) education to make them "new-era free elders" adapted to the changes of the times. Meanwhile, NPC Deputy Liu Zhongbin advocated for incorporating elderly education fully into the lifelong learning system and called for the formulation of a specialized elderly education law. This law would clarify the responsibilities, rights, and obligations of the government, society, and elderly groups in elderly education and, based on legal foundations, promote the effective formulation and implementation of related policies. In 2024, Meng Zhengjie, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of East China Normal University, proposed the "Guiding Plan for the Construction of Elderly Education Curriculum System in Shanghai." This plan aims to promote the transformation of elderly education courses from "traditional models" to "deepening and innovation" to meet the diversified needs of elderly people for higher education.

From the above policy community perspectives, all parties have given a positive attitude toward elderly education. In specific policy implementations, they have discussed the improvement of elderly education laws and mechanisms, the construction of standard indicators, and the innovation of methods and means. Various proposals in the above policy stream have promoted policy changes in elderly education. Government officials and experts have put forward reform plans and "softened" government thinking through various means, forming a broad consensus within the policy community, thereby expanding the policy's influence and gaining the attention of decision-makers. However, the original policy proposals for elderly education in China are still relatively scarce, and the policy community is in a loose state. The policy community has mainly constructed a policy theoretical framework, while the specific mechanism construction still depends on the government's policy practice to be implemented.

3.3. Political Stream

3.3.1. *The Party's Concept of Elderly Education Work*

In the context of globalization, to effectively respond to the challenges brought by population aging, China has solemnly committed to and meticulously planned a series of forward-looking strategies, enabling the elderly population to remain active on the stage of social development, jointly creating a new era of a harmonious society [6].

Firstly, elderly education is considered within the overall framework of national development and people's well-being. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has repeatedly emphasized the need to ensure the rights of the elderly, meet their educational needs, enhance awareness of caring for the elderly, and highlight the social value of the elderly in the new era. Improving the educational level of the elderly is seen as a core element in addressing population aging. Secondly, the positive role of the elderly and elderly society in socio-economic development is actively recognized. The Central Committee acknowledges that the elderly are not a burden on society but an important resource and wealth. As the aging level in China deepens, the demand for elderly education is rapidly increasing. Strengthening the guidance, planning, and technological innovation of elderly education to promote the healthy development of the industry chain has a positive effect on promoting socio-economic development. Lastly, the Party has established systematic concepts and strategic plans, guided by the concept of high-quality and healthy aging education. The focus is on researching national strategies for actively responding to population aging, formulating a long-term strategic task list, improving elderly education policies and systems, establishing comprehensive supervision systems for elderly education, and continuously optimizing and exploring educational structures through policy pilots and various practical forms, thereby driving the introduction of elderly education policies.

Under these strategic guidelines, further optimization of elderly education resource allocation, improvement of elderly education quality, and joint efforts to build a harmonious society are pursued [6].

3.3.2. *Government's "Delegation, Regulation, and Service" Concept*

In the new era, provincial and municipal governments across the country have met the educational needs of the elderly by increasing infrastructure investment and optimizing resource allocation, providing extensive support and assurance for the elderly [7].

The “Delegation, Regulation, and Service” (DRS) reform, as a comprehensive self-revolution of the Chinese government, has inevitably had a significant impact on the introduction of elderly education policies. From the perspective of DRS reform in the field of elderly education, “Delegation” means returning the power to provide elderly education to the market, communities, service institutions, and industry organizations. It involves decentralizing elderly education-related powers from a single superior department to grassroots governments. While delegating, it is also necessary to establish a good joint supervision mechanism and a list of responsibilities to avoid regulatory overlaps. “Regulation” involves innovating and exploring mechanisms and methods for elderly education, promoting standardization, ensuring a fair and just elderly education market, and regulating and guiding the development of the elderly education industry. “Service” emphasizes catering to the educational needs of the elderly. The government optimizes processes for the elderly education market and promotes big data governance services, enabling market capital and social forces to efficiently and conveniently join the elderly education industry. Under the guidance and promotion of the DRS concept, the government lowers entry barriers to the elderly education market, promotes its comprehensive liberalization, and strengthens comprehensive supervision and management, advancing standardization and institutional innovation.

3.3.3. Public Sentiment on Elderly Education Issues

Whether social issues can ultimately be transformed into concrete policy measures largely depends on whether policymakers can deeply understand and genuinely address the social problems and needs reflected by the public.

In Chinese culture, it is generally believed that old age should be peaceful and leisurely, which is significantly different from the currently prevalent concept of “active aging.” “Active aging” does not specifically refer to continued work, but rather encourages the elderly to actively participate in diverse social activities. More importantly, the elderly is not just part of society but are a valuable asset to it, rather than merely bystanders or dependents.

4. The Pending Policy Window: Legislative Obstacles and Breakthroughs

Currently, the difficulty in rapidly advancing elderly education legislation is multifaceted, involving the complexity of issues, political factors, and various solutions [8]. These intricate factors make it difficult for policymakers to reach a consensus on elderly education legislation [9].

To ensure the vigorous development of elderly education, building a solid legal foundation is crucial, and the importance and urgency of national legislation cannot be ignored [10]. However, it is also necessary to carefully consider the various difficulties and challenges that may arise during the legislative process. Despite the thorny path of legislation, the government, researchers, and every member of society bear significant responsibility and mission. Therefore, it is essential to view the development of elderly education from a new perspective, increase efforts in learning and research, and work together to promote the construction of a learning society [11].

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