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Youth Night Schools and Perceived Youth Development: Learning Motivations, Course Satisfaction and Educational Outcomes in Zhejiang Province, China

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Abstract

Youth night schools have emerged rapidly as a non-degree educational model within urban youth education practices in China in recent years; they also serve as an important vehicle for extending the concept of lifelong education to young people.A total of 385 valid responses were collected from the survey. The results indicate that youth night schools possess a solid foundation of social recognition and strong participation willingness; participants are predominantly working adults, whose primary learning motivations include fostering personal interests, enriching their spiritual and cultural lives, and alleviating stress, while also encompassing the needs to acquire new skills and enhance their professional competitiveness.This study suggests that youth night schools in Zhejiang Province should transition from being "interest-based training platforms" to "support platforms for lifelong learning among youth." To achieve this transformation, they should establish a demand-driven course provision mechanism, a multi-stakeholder collaborative resource integration mechanism, a flexible and accessible learning support mechanism, and a diversified, ongoing evaluation mechanism for learning outcomes—thereby realizing a functional upgrade from "meeting immediate needs" to "promoting sustainable development."

Keywords: lifelong education, youth night schools, youth development, talent cultivation

1. Introduction

With the development of the digital economy, industrial structural adjustments, and evolving employment patterns among young people, the learning needs of this demographic are becoming increasingly fragmented, personalized, practice-oriented, and sustained. While traditional school education primarily serves the purposes of academic credential acquisition and systematic talent cultivation, young adults entering the workforce still require continuous updates to their knowledge, acquisition of new skills, cultivation of personal interests, expansion of social networks, and enhancement of their ability to adapt to societal changes. In this context, youth night schools—which organize learning activities during evening and weekend hours—have gradually gained traction (Yan, 2024). The model of "working during the day and learning at night" has emerged as a new learning approach for young people in certain cities (Zhang, 2024). Consequently, youth night schools have evolved from their early forms, which focused mainly on academic remediation and degree attainment, into non-academic learning platforms that integrate interest-based education, vocational skills training, cultural literacy development, physical and mental well-being support, and social interaction opportunities.

From the perspective of lifelong learning, the value of youth night schools extends beyond offering a limited number of interest-based courses; rather, it lies in extending educational resources from schools to communities, neighborhoods, industrial parks, and other spheres of social life, thereby providing young people with more accessible, flexible, and low-cost learning opportunities. Existing research and practical experience indicate that the current development of youth night schools still faces several challenges: an insufficiently defined functional positioning, a curriculum structure that inadequately aligns with the developmental needs of young people, diverse operating entities coupled with inadequate collaborative mechanisms, limited availability of teaching staff and physical facilities, and an underdeveloped quality evaluation system (Zou, 2024). The research proposal also explicitly states that the future development of youth night schools must address core questions—such as "what role they should play in the development of young people, and through what mechanisms they can achieve empowerment" —while identifying the establishment of a coherent curriculum system, the adoption of appropriate teaching methodologies, the fostering of multi-stakeholder collaboration, and the implementation of institutional safeguards as key pathways to achieving these goals.

Zhejiang Province possesses a solid foundation for lifelong education, along with abundant educational resources—including open universities, community education programs, and vocational education initiatives. In recent years, youth night schools have been steadily expanding across various regions of the province, providing valuable practical contexts for examining the learning needs of young people and the transformation of non-degree education. Accordingly, this study focuses on youth night schools in Zhejiang Province. Building upon a preliminary research framework and utilizing data from 385 student questionnaires, this paper conducts an empirical analysis of three key aspects: "Why these schools attract young people," "What benefits they offer young people," and "What resources are currently lacking." Furthermore, the study explores the functional positioning of these schools and proposes viable implementation pathways.

2. Method

2.1 Survey Design

This study employed a questionnaire survey, targeting young participants in evening schools, and included items addressing basic demographic characteristics, information acquisition channels, learning motivations, course satisfaction, teaching evaluations, learning outcomes, functional perceptions, facility requirements, course requirements, and barriers to participation. A total of 385 responses were collected, and the survey content largely aligned with the dimensions outlined in the project proposal—namely "course requirements, learning behaviors, teaching quality, and career development needs."

It should be noted that the existing statistical reports consist of aggregated data exported from the questionnaire platform, and for some open-ended questions, only the details of the most recent 100 responses have been retained. Accordingly, this study primarily conducts a descriptive analysis of the open-ended questions, while the statistical analysis of all 385 samples is based on the aggregated results provided by the questionnaire platform.

2.2 Basic Characteristics of the Sample

By age, there were 209 participants aged 36 and above, accounting for 54.29%; 106 participants aged 29–35, accounting for 27.53%; 64 participants aged 23–28, accounting for 16.62%; and 6 participants aged 18–22, accounting for 1.56%. This indicates that the participants in this youth night school survey are not primarily concentrated in the traditional sense of early youth stages, but instead exhibit a certain age diversity, suggesting that the youth night school has actually attracted a considerable number of learners who possess stable employment and relatively mature life needs.

By gender, there were 321 females, accounting for 83.38%, and 64 males, accounting for 16.62%, indicating a significantly higher participation rate among females. In terms of employment status, there were 273 employed individuals, representing 70.91%; 40 freelancers, accounting for 10.39%; 13 students, accounting for 3.38%; 12 unemployed persons or job seekers, accounting for 3.12%; and 47 other individuals, accounting for 12.21%. This demonstrates that the primary target audience for the Youth Night School consists of individuals who are employed and seek to engage in learning during their non-working hours.

In terms of awareness level, 31.69% of participants reported being "very familiar" with youth night schools, 61.04% reported having "some familiarity," while only 7.27% had never heard of them. Regarding sources of information, social media platforms accounted for 61.56%, introductions from friends, colleagues, and classmates accounted for 42.86%, and outreach efforts by open universities, communities, and neighborhood offices accounted for 35.32%. These findings indicate that youth night schools possess strong attributes of both online and interpersonal dissemination, and that grassroots public education organizations also play a significant role in information dissemination.

3. Motivations and Needs Structure of Young People in Zhejiang Night School

3.1 Interest and Needs Constitute the Primary Driving Force for Participation

The survey reveals that 330 participants (85.71%) selected "cultivating hobbies and interests and enriching their leisure life" as their primary motivation, a significantly higher proportion than other options; 47.79% cited "reducing work/life stress and relaxing the mind and body"; 38.18% indicated that "the courses offer good value for money and they are eager to explore new learning content"; while both "acquiring practical skills to enhance professional competitiveness" and "improving overall personal qualities and achieving self-value addition" were selected by 37.66% of participants. These findings demonstrate that the most direct appeal of current youth night schools remains interest and quality of life, rather than traditional academic credential attainment.

This finding does not imply that the career development function is unimportant. On the contrary, options such as skill acquisition, enhancement of overall competencies, and improvement of professional competitiveness all account for a relatively high proportion of responses, indicating that young people participating in evening schools are driven by multifaceted motivations: on one hand, they seek mental relaxation and enriched living experiences through interest-based courses; on the other hand, they aim to enhance their personal capabilities through learning. Consequently, evening schools for young people possess a solid practical foundation for evolving from "leisure education" to "developmental education."

3.2 The Learning Needs of Young People Exhibit a Multifaceted Nature

The open-ended questions reveal a wide array of curriculum needs, encompassing yoga, Pilates, dance, instrumental music, calligraphy, painting, baking, tea ceremony, makeup, photography, AI, video editing, swimming, combat sports, traditional Chinese opera, and more. This indicates that the learning needs of young people are not limited to a single vocational skill; rather, they encompass multidimensional requirements—including physical health, artistic aesthetics, traditional culture, digital skills, life skills, and professional competencies.

From the perspective of lifelong education, this demand structure necessitates that youth night schools avoid organizing courses solely based on traditional disciplinary classifications. Instead, they should design courses around the real-life scenarios of young people, integrating elements such as "professional development, interest cultivation, physical and mental well-being, social interaction, and life skills" to establish a curriculum system that is more life-oriented and practical.

3.3 Available Study Time Has Become a Key Constraint Influencing Participation

Regarding the acceptable duration of a single session, 47.01% of participants opted for 1–1.5 hours, while 45.97% chose 1.5–2 hours; together, these proportions account for 92.98%. This indicates that youth evening school courses should be characterized by short durations, high efficiency, and ease of sustained participation.

Meanwhile, among the reasons for not participating in evening school programs, "conflict between class schedules and personal commitments" accounted for 47.53% of responses, making it the most frequently cited reason; "excessive distance to the class venue" accounted for 32.47%; "lack of awareness about relevant enrollment information" accounted for 25.71%; and "no courses of interest" accounted for 22.08%. This indicates that the barriers to developing youth evening school programs extend beyond curriculum provision to include issues of time, space, and access to information. Therefore, in addition to ensuring the quality of courses, youth evening school programs should prioritize "accessibility" as a key public service indicator.

4. Analysis of Educational Quality and Learning Outcomes of Youth Night School Programs

4.1 Overall Satisfaction with Course Instruction Is Relatively High

In the survey, trainees achieved an average overall course satisfaction score of 4.83 (on a 5-point scale) across the following dimensions: classroom or online platform experience (4.80), course content practicality (4.82), instructor presentation clarity (4.85), classroom interactive atmosphere (4.84), practical exercise design (4.82), and appropriate course difficulty level (4.83). These results indicate that existing youth night schools have received high ratings regarding course offerings and instructional organization. Among the overall satisfaction ratings, 87.01% of participants selected the highest score of

Regarding course difficulty, 84.94% of learners rated the course as "moderate in difficulty, perfectly suited to my needs," while 12.21% found it "slightly challenging but manageable"; only 2.34% considered it too easy, and 0.52% found it too difficult. This indicates that, overall, the current course has effectively achieved a balance between its difficulty level and the learners' proficiency levels.

4.2 The Quality of the Teaching Staff and the Practicality of the Curriculum Are Key Factors in Determining the Value of the Curriculum

When selecting the most important factors for ideal evening school programs, "the professional competence of the instructors" accounted for 76.10%, while "the practicality and appeal of the course content" accounted for 75.84%, ranking as the most prominent considerations; "convenience of class scheduling time" accounted for 62.86%, and "convenience of class location" accounted for 61.04%. This indicates that young adults' evaluations of evening school programs are not solely driven by cost, but rather place greater emphasis on course quality, instructor expertise, and ease of participation.

Among the satisfactory teaching content, 64.42% of participants rated the teachers 'explanations as vivid and engaging, 60.78% found the key knowledge points practical and immediately applicable after completion, 50.65% appreciated the classroom interactions, and 50.13% valued the teachers' patience in addressing questions. This further demonstrates that the combination of "professional instructors + practical content + effective interaction" constitutes the core framework for ensuring the quality of youth evening school courses.

4.3 Practical Implementation Efforts Still Need to Be Strengthened to Transition from Satisfaction to Sustainable Development

Although the current teaching evaluation results are relatively high, trainees still have a strong and concentrated demand for teaching improvements. Specifically, 51.95% of trainees would like to increase the proportion of hands-on practice sessions, 29.87% would like to enhance teacher-student and trainee interactions, 29.87% would like to supplement post-class learning materials and Q&A channels, and 21.04% would like to adjust the course pace. This indicates that the key focus for quality enhancement in the next phase of the youth evening school program is not simply to increase the number of courses, but rather to enhance the practicality, interactivity, and continuity of the courses.

This finding aligns closely with the philosophy of lifelong learning. Courses that truly provide empowerment value should not be limited to a "one-off experience," but instead establish a cyclical process of "learning—practice—feedback—relearning." Accordingly, youth night schools should appropriately incorporate project-based learning, case-based teaching, hands-on assignments, and after-class tutoring, enabling participants to transform classroom knowledge into practical competencies.

4.4 Learning Outcomes Exhibit a Diversified Structure Encompassing "Interest to Ocial Skills"

After participating in the Youth Night School, 71.69% of participants reported developing new hobbies or interests; 60.52% acquired new practical skills or professional knowledge; 55.06% experienced reduced stress in their work and personal lives and enriched their leisure activities; 37.66% improved their overall personal qualities and self-confidence; 34.03% met like-minded friends and expanded their social circles; 14.55% obtained relevant competency certifications or learning outcomes; and only 2.08% reported no significant changes.

These findings indicate that the value of youth night schools has extended beyond mere knowledge transmission; they serve as learning spaces, cultural life spaces, and social interaction spaces. The highest proportion of participants reports interest cultivation, demonstrating that the emotional and lifestyle value of youth night schools constitutes a key attraction; meanwhile, the proportion of participants reporting skill enhancement reaches 60.52%, underscoring their significant role in boosting human capital. Therefore, youth night schools should effectively integrate these three dimensions—interest, capability, and social relationships.

5. Functional Positioning of Youth Night Schools in Empowering Youth Development

5.1 Transitioning from an "Interest-Based Classroom" to a "Lifelong Learning Support Platform"

Surveys indicate that the primary motivation for young people to participate in night schools is interest; however, their learning outcomes have already extended to skills, literacy, social competence, and personal development. Consequently, night schools for young people should not be positioned merely as interest-based training programs, but rather as platforms for lifelong

learning support for young people. Their fundamental role is to provide young people with low-threshold, flexible, and sustainable learning opportunities, enabling them to consistently access learning support tailored to their different life stages and developmental goals.

5.2 Emphasize the Functions of Capability Enhancement and Professional Development

The average rating for the perceived value of enhancing professional competitiveness among youth night school participants was 4.58, with 71.69% of participants giving a rating of 5, indicating broad recognition of the value of these night schools in fostering professional capabilities. Although interest-based education remains the primary demand, courses covering digital skills, professional skills, and life skills also hold significant potential. Therefore, youth night schools should adopt a combined model comprising "interest-based courses + skill-based courses + development courses," thereby enhancing their talent cultivation capabilities while upholding their public welfare nature and inclusive accessibility.

5.3 Strengthen the Role of Spiritual Culture and Comprehensive Literacy

The youth night school has achieved an average score of 4.79 in enriching the spiritual and cultural life of young people and enhancing their overall competencies, making it a high-performing dimension across various functional assessment areas. Courses covering hobbies and interests, traditional culture, artistic literacy, and physical health not only provide recreational opportunities but also help young people cultivate a more positive lifestyle. Therefore, youth night schools should integrate cultural literacy with youth development to establish a curriculum system that reflects both local cultural characteristics and the distinctive realities of young people's lives.

5.4 Fostering Social Interaction and Community Integration Capabilities

Youth night schools received an average score of 4.56 on the evaluation of providing a social platform and expanding professional networks. Although this functional assessment score is slightly lower than that of cultural and learning support features, it still remains at a relatively high level. Night schools inherently possess attributes of group learning and shared practice, making them an important venue for young people to build social relationships and accumulate social capital. Particularly in the context of increasing mobility among urban youth, community-based youth night schools can help strengthen the ties between young people and their communities.

5.5 Serve as a Platform for Unlocking Potential and Fostering Sustainable Development

Youth night schools have achieved an average score of 4.79 in helping young people tap into their interests and explore additional development opportunities, indicating that young people do not view these programs merely as short-term consumption experiences. Some learners may progress from interest-based learning to the acquisition of professional skills, career direction, or even entrepreneurial projects. Consequently, youth night schools can provide continuous support—spanning from interest discovery to skill development and ultimately to career decision-making—through tiered course offerings, project-based practice, outcome demonstrations, and resource connections.

6. Key Challenges Facing the Development of Zhejiang Youth Night School

First, the functional positioning still exhibits a certain inclination toward being driven by "interests." Currently, the appeal of youth night schools primarily stems from participants 'interests and leisure needs; however, their developmental functions—such as vocational skills, innovation and entrepreneurship, and digital literacy—have not yet been fully systematized. How to enhance talent cultivation capabilities while preserving young people's enthusiasm for participation will be crucial for future development.

Second, there remains a need to better align the course offerings with the diverse needs of young people. Open-ended feedback indicates that participants express a desire for more courses in sports, arts, traditional culture, digital technology, and life skills. At the same time, some participants have raised concerns regarding insufficient course slots, a limited variety of course options, and infrequent course offerings. Consequently, the provision of courses should shift from merely "having courses" to "delivering targeted offerings."

Third, there is still room for improvement in practical teaching and learning support. Over half of the participants expressed a desire for more hands-on practice sessions, while some participants requested post-class video replays, supplementary learning materials, and dedicated Q&A channels. This indicates that current youth evening schools still predominantly rely on offline classroom instruction; therefore, it is essential to establish an integrated online-offline learning support system.

Fourth, temporal and spatial accessibility constrains youth participation. Among respondents, 47.53% cited time conflicts as a key reason for their lack of participation, while 32.47% reported that distance from the venue influenced their decision. The public welfare nature of youth night schools should be reflected not only in affordable pricing but also in convenience regarding time, location, and access to information.

Fifth, evaluation mechanisms need to shift from satisfaction-based assessments to assessments of developmental outcomes. While current course satisfaction rates are relatively high, such satisfaction primarily reflects the learning experience and cannot fully demonstrate whether young people's competencies have genuinely improved. In the future, it would be advisable to incorporate additional indicators—such as skill acquisition, tangible work outputs, course repeat enrollment rates, learning transfer, career development, and social engagement—to establish an evaluation framework that better aligns with the characteristics of non-degree education.

7. Implementation Pathways for Empowering Youth Development Through Youth Night Schools

7.1 Establish a Course Supply Mechanism Driven by "Demand Profiling"

Youth night schools should move away from merely offering courses based solely on available resources, and instead establish a curriculum development mechanism centered on the needs of young people. They can create learning need profiles for youth based on age, occupation, interests, and developmental stage; conduct regular surveys on course demand; and dynamically adjust their course offerings by integrating enrollment data, course feedback,

and learning behavior trends (Communist Youth League of China, 2024). The curriculum system should comprise five key modules—ideological guidance, vocational skills, cultural literacy, personal interests and hobbies, and physical and mental health—and incorporate specialized courses tailored to local conditions.

7.2 Establish a Tiered Curriculum System Comprising "Interest Cultivation to Practical Application of Outcomes"

Given that young learners' motivations often evolve from mere interest to a focus on skill development, courses can be categorized into four tiers: experiential, foundational, advanced, and applied (Jiang, C. C, 2019). Experiential courses address the question of "whether one wants to learn"; foundational courses address the question of "whether one can learn"; advanced courses address the question of "whether one can learn in depth"; and applied courses address the question of "whether one can apply what has been learned." This tiered approach ensures that night school programs do not remain confined to a one-time experiential experience.

7.3 Refine the Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Mechanism Comprising "Open University to Social Organization"

The application proposes the exploration of a "night school alliance" involving multiple stakeholders to achieve shared access to curricula, venues, and teaching staff. Given the high demand identified in the questionnaire for community cultural activity centers, classrooms in universities and vocational schools, as well as cultural centers and libraries, this initiative can further promote the open sharing of educational resources. Open universities can leverage their strengths in integrating lifelong education resources and organizing teaching activities; universities can provide specialized teaching faculty and appropriate venues; enterprises can offer vocational skill courses and practical training environments; community organizations can provide logistical support; and social training institutions can deliver specialized courses. Such multi-stakeholder collaboration can alleviate operational pressures on any single entity.

7.4 Build a Multidisciplinary Teaching Faculty Composed of "Professional Instructors + industry Mentors + Outstanding Students"

Participants regard the professional competence of instructors as one of the most critical factors in an ideal curriculum; therefore, the quality of teaching staff is pivotal to the sustainable development of youth night schools (Ma, X. Q, 2025). It is essential to establish stable mechanisms for instructor recruitment, training, and evaluation, while also engaging industry experts, vocational skill professionals, and outstanding participants in teaching activities. For courses involving rapidly evolving domains—such as digital technologies, AI, and vocational skills—a joint teaching model combining university faculty and industry mentors can be adopted to enhance the practical applicability and cutting-edge relevance of the curriculum.

7.5 Establish a Flexible and User-friendly Learning Support System

Given the fragmented time availability among young adults, it is advisable to limit the duration of individual courses, prioritize scheduling sessions lasting 1–2 hours, and explore offering courses during various evening time slots and on weekends. For courses suitable for online

learning, providers may offer live streaming, pre-recorded sessions, and post-course resources; for courses requiring hands-on, in-person participation, offline practical training should be emphasized. By integrating "online learning + offline practice + post-course support," a comprehensive learning ecosystem can be established. Simultaneously, mechanisms for course registration, admission notifications, and course reminders should be further optimized to reduce the time and information costs associated with young adults' participation.

7.6 Establish a Learning Outcome Evaluation Mechanism Centered on Competency Development

Youth night schools should gradually transition from "satisfaction-based" evaluations to developmental evaluations focusing on "what has been learned, what changes have been achieved, and what capabilities have been acquired." Learning portfolios can be established to document course participation, work outputs, skill-based tasks, and learning feedback; approaches such as micro-certifications, learning certificates, and credit banks can be explored to certify continuous learning and phased achievements (Deng, J, 2025). Evaluation indicators may include course satisfaction, skill mastery, learning persistence, work outputs, course repeat enrollment rate, changes in social interactions, and feedback on professional development.

7.7 Strengthen Digital Governance and Quality Assurance

Social media has become a vital channel for young people to access information about evening schools, accounting for 61.56% of such usage. Accordingly, a unified information dissemination and course service platform should be established to create an integrated management system encompassing course release, registration, reminders, evaluations, certification, and feedback mechanisms (Liao, X. Q, 2024). For both public and private evening schools, fundamental operational standards and quality assessment mechanisms should be developed, with particular emphasis on standardizing aspects such as course quality, fee structures, teaching staff qualifications, privacy protection, and safety management.

8. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on survey data from 385 young participants in evening schools, this study finds that evening schools for youth in Zhejiang Province have established a solid foundation for youth participation, with primary participants consisting of working adults, and their learning motivations exhibiting distinct multifaceted characteristics. The cultivation of interests and enrichment of spiritual and cultural lives serve as the primary drivers for youth participation in these programs; however, skill acquisition, enhancement of overall competencies, and strengthening of professional competitiveness also constitute significant demands. Overall course satisfaction remains high, while the professional competence of instructors, the practicality of course content, and the convenience of time and space are key factors influencing the perceived value of these programs. Consequently, youth evening schools have yielded multifaceted benefits, including interest cultivation, skill enhancement, stress reduction, improvement of comprehensive literacy, and facilitation of social interaction.

Overall, youth night schools play a crucial role in bridging the needs of young people with lifelong learning resources. In the future, youth night schools in Zhejiang Province should

avoid focusing solely on the quantity of courses or short-term popularity; instead, they should place greater emphasis on course quality, learning sustainability, resource synergy, and developmental outcomes. Building on an "interest-driven" approach, they should further strengthen "skill empowerment" and "developmental support," gradually establishing a youth lifelong learning service model with distinctive Zhejiang characteristics. This approach will provide practical support for refining the national lifelong learning system and fostering the comprehensive development of young people.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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