

The Application of Participatory Art Education Curriculum Design Focused on the Psychological Well-being of Left-behind Children in Rural Revitalization

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Abstract: The future of rural areas hinges not only on the future of its people but particularly on the future of its children. Art must be integrated with education, delving into the realms of children's psychology, rural culture, and social ecology. Furthermore, culture can reciprocally influence the economy, with the enhancement of spiritual culture having a positive impact on rural economic revitalization. This paper thus focuses on how to address the issue of adverse mental health conditions in children, improve their life skills, and enhance economic conditions in rural areas through participatory art education activities and design. By researching contemporary psychological issues among rural children, it grasps the fundamental problems and expounds on the concept of participatory art education in the context of rural revitalization. Scientific data analysis of various indicator systems is conducted using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), with Yantianzi Village in Hong Kong as an example. This paper creatively proposes an integrated system of participatory design and art education curriculum, encompassing culture, psychology, skills, and personality development. The aim is to use art education as a means to positively influence the rural economic improvement process, while also providing social value to the development of children and the overall cultural and economic thought of rural areas. This research contributes to the enhancement, refinement, and innovation of existing rural art education teaching systems.

Keywords: rural revitalization, participatory design, left-behind children's psychology, art education

1. Introduction

With the development of urbanization, a large number of migrant workers have poured into cities, intensifying the issue of rural hollowing. Young and middle-aged individuals have moved to cities for their livelihoods, while their children and elderly family members remain in rural areas. As a result, many young people are unwilling to return to their hometowns, leading to an increase in the number of left-behind children. According to surveys, left-behind children, during their upbringing, are susceptible to developing unhealthy personalities and may even exhibit extreme behaviors due to the absence of family bonds and psychological care.

Art education is a subtle means of guiding the psychological well-being of children. However, existing methods of art education often lack a genuine connection with children's inner psyche. They sometimes resemble activities conducted by teachers solely to meet performance targets, and children's receptiveness is not optimistic. Indeed, prior research, such as Wang Mingmei's studies on participatory art education in the context of art encounters, has laid some groundwork. Still, it hasn't fully integrated design principles with the psychological impact on children. Therefore, this study aims to merge sociology, psychology, and design, employing participatory design methodologies to creatively propose a novel participatory art education system. The objective is to further enhance the design of art education for left-behind children.

2. Background and Research Questions

2.1. The Problems Faced by Rural Areas in Contemporary China

The "Statistical Communique of the People's Republic of China on the National Economy and Social Development for 2022" indicates that by the end of 2022, the total population of the country was 1,411.75 million, a decrease of 8.5 million compared to the previous year [1]. Among them, the urban population was 920.71 million. In recent years, Chinese cities have continued to flourish, while a significant portion of the rural population is unwilling to stay in the countryside, leading to the hollowing out of villages and the phenomenon of empty-nest households among farmers. This hollowing out, coupled with a stagnating rural economy, has formed a vicious cycle. Additionally, the destruction of natural and cultural heritage, as well as the disappearance of local culture, remain unresolved issues.

2.2. The Issue of Rural Children in the Context of Rural Hollowing

The issue of rural hollowing is severe, with a large influx of migrant workers into cities, resulting in left-behind children becoming a legacy problem. Left-behind children spend minimal time with their parents during their formative years, lacking communication and emotional care. Consequently, most of them struggle to develop complete and independent personalities due to the prolonged absence of emotional support. Field investigations, on-site interviews, and literature research have identified several problems in the education of left-behind children:

2.2.1. Psychological and Emotional Issues

Social and emotional difficulties, shyness, and low self-esteem: Field interviews revealed that most children exhibit avoidance behaviors when encountering strangers, and they often experience a dual tendency of low self-esteem coupled with self-importance.

Emotional instability and negative impulsivity: Due to a long-term lack of affection and an incomplete understanding of what love is and how to express and receive it, left-behind children often experience emotional imbalances. They also frequently face a disparity between their emotional expectations and reality. The absence of companionship leads to a lack of a sense of security, resulting in negative emotional responses. A psychological survey by Sichuan Province psychologist You Deliang found that nearly 80% of left-behind children exhibit psychological problems. Research by Li Baofeng showed that left-behind children scored higher than the national norms on depression, hostility, and other factors, reaching significant differences in depression and hostility levels [2].

Cognitive distortions and inner confusion: This is manifested in issues related to self-awareness and values. Left-behind children often lack self-perception and an independent sense of self. They tend to rely on external projections to judge themselves. Moreover, they lack wise elders to

cultivate their values and worldviews, resulting in a poor understanding of their social environment. This leads to difficulty in facing challenges, susceptibility to temptation, lack of initiative, black-and-white thinking, and the emergence of personality disorders such as borderline, self-destructive, and avoidant types.

2.2.2. Behavioral Norms and Conduct Issues

Due to a lack of guidance, left-behind children tend to have weaker self-discipline and self-awareness. They often have weaker moral consciousness and an inadequate understanding of ethical norms. In their daily lives, they may exhibit misconduct, including lying, using foul language, neglecting hygiene, disliking school, being prone to fights, reckless spending, running up debts at local stores, getting addicted to video games, intimidating and extorting their peers, and more.

2.2.3. Personal Safety Issues

According to statistics from the Ministry of Public Security, left-behind children in rural areas have become a high-risk group for various types of criminal victimization. [3] Due to the lack of comprehensive education, they are more vulnerable to crimes such as sexual assault, drowning, traffic accidents, pesticide poisoning, fires, and electric shocks. In addition, activities like bathing in ponds and ditches, climbing utility poles, engaging in physical fights, playing with toy guns, and trespassing to steal crops pose safety hazards [4].

2.3. The Starting Point of Using Art Education as a Means to Alleviate Rural Children's Challenges

The Influence of Art Education Means on Individuals: In “The Value of Aesthetic Education in Promoting Comprehensive Human Development,” the 18th-century German philosopher Johann Nikolaus Tetens divided human psychological functions into three parts: knowledge, emotion, and will. [5] Emotions are mainly enriched through aesthetics, and aesthetic activities cultivate a person's temperament, which is an important component of promoting comprehensive human development. By using art education as a means to enhance the knowledge and moral standards of rural children, on the one hand, it works subtly without compulsion, avoiding strong resistance. On the other hand, it enhances their sense of aesthetics, creating a sense of pleasure, akin to the influence of gentle nurturing, resulting in the children receiving a good education.

The core logic of resolving rural challenges is that culture reciprocally affects the economic and political aspects. Through activities like art education, psychological problems can be addressed, cognitive levels can be improved, life skills can be enhanced, ultimately leading to the revitalization of rural economies.

2.4. Policy and Sociocultural Value Alignment: The Era of Integration of Rural Revitalization Strategy and Education Policy

2.4.1. Meeting the Inherent Needs of Public Society by Integrating Aesthetic Education into Rural Revitalization:

In this new era, people's demands for living environments and aesthetic entertainment are gradually increasing. The integration of aesthetic education into public society has significant advantages. It can elevate the inner happiness of rural populations and play a role in preserving local culture.

2.4.2. The Demand for Harmonious Coexistence Between Humans and Nature Within the Concept of Green Development and the Integration of Aesthetic Education:

To protect the environment and natural resources and ensure the harmonious development of humans and the environment, promoting ecological civilization requires the involvement of aesthetic education and the arts. Visual communication and environmental impact can promote the concept of green development.

2.4.3. The Cultural Logic of Rural Aesthetic Education on Psychological and Spiritual Well-being:

The notion of being a “cultured person” has a significant role in enlightening one’s thinking and rectifying one’s character. Aesthetic education not only enhances the appreciation of the arts but, more importantly, fosters an appreciation for virtues. It cultivates a strong sense of humanistic literacy, nurtures life skills, and contributes significantly to promoting rural culture and economic revitalization.

3. Participatory Art Education Design in the Context of Rural Revitalization

3.1. Overview

Combining participatory design with art education is not only a way to enrich the educational significance of design but also a means to enhance the efficiency of rural education. In terms of form, it transforms passive learning into active learning. According to the “Learning Pyramid” report published by the Maine State Training Laboratory in the United States, human learning can be divided into two levels: passive learning and active learning. [6] Therefore, the participatory art education design system requires a shift from passive learning to active learning. It aims to change the traditional model of passive lecturing by teachers to stimulate students’ inner motivation and involvement. This, in turn, improves the effectiveness of art education. By incorporating artistic design, it aims to improve children’s psychological well-being, enhance their personalities, and contribute to the revitalization of rural society.

For rural society, this approach represents a form of rural democratization design that delves deep into the psychological well-being of village residents, especially children. It involves the participation of villagers, children, schools, and various stakeholders in the design decision-making and design process. The goal is to explore and integrate various perspectives in the design research to propose innovative solutions that are truly centered around rural children and have practical application value and significance.

3.2. Principles

3.2.1. The Human-Centered Principle

Professor Wen Tiejun once emphasized that rural development activities should be human-centered. This means that rural development should revolve around people, with people as the subject and people as the goal. The participatory art education system design does not prioritize skill training but views skills as a bridge and tool. Ultimately, it revolves around the principle of being human-centered. It mobilizes people’s enthusiasm and offers different solutions to various children’s issues. It focuses on the psychological problems, spiritual needs, and the future paths of left-behind children, aiming to achieve a deeper understanding of the true, the good, and the beautiful aspects related to humanity, society, and the environment.

3.2.2. The Sustainable Systematic Design Principle

This principle emphasizes the establishment of a sustainable, systematic, and comprehensive mechanism. It integrates teaching, feedback, and production into a unified system, perfecting classroom teaching activities, environmental spaces, and cultural and spiritual systems. It establishes a model that combines “art education knowledge + local culture + aesthetic enhancement + creative output + personality shaping.” The materials used, such as the venue and tools, should be environmentally friendly and recyclable, aiming to prevent environmental pollution and resource waste. Leveraging the characteristics of the times to increase influence and dissemination, it encourages the participation of various social forces.

3.2.3. The Localization Principle: Focusing on Local Culture and Historical Context

Art education should be tailored to different regions and types of children. It leverages art and design to activate the intangible cultural characteristics of rural areas and rebuild the root cohesion of rural relationships. For example, in regions with ethnic characteristics or a rich history of traditional culture or intangible cultural heritage, activities can be incorporated into the curriculum. Examples include printmaking in Suzhou or clay figurine-making in Tianjin. These activities not only pass on intangible cultural heritage but also provide children with livelihood skills. By immersing children in the essence of traditional culture, it enhances their aesthetic appreciation.

4. Systematic Design of the Participatory Art Education Activity System

4.1. Research on the Specialized Activity Curriculum System

4.1.1. Establishment of an Evaluation System

Based on the concept of rural children’s education, the evaluation criteria include five subsets, namely natural characteristics, cultural characteristics, service industry characteristics, psychological characteristics, and interactive characteristics. Each of these subsets corresponds to various statistical parameters, forming a rural education characteristic system model - a pentagonal structural evaluation model.

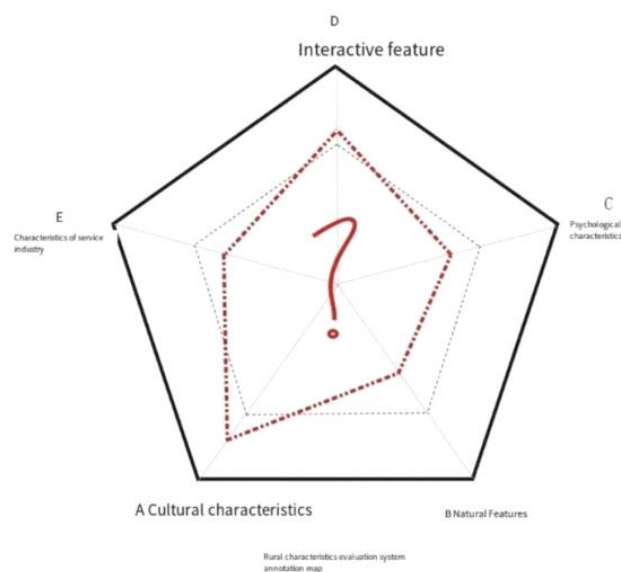


Figure 1: Establishment of an Evaluation System.

4.1.2. Evaluation Method

Multiple experts are employed to assign values using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP). Simultaneously, the method of eigenvalue and eigenvector is applied to solve the judgment matrix. The final weights are determined by checking the weights of each hierarchical element.

n represents the final number of items within each criterion level. M represents the proportion score of each item. According to the pentagonal structural evaluation model, 5 target levels, 13 criterion levels, and 72 item indicators are selected to construct the rural characteristic evaluation indicator system.

The calculation formula is as follows:

$$S_{NK} = \sum_{i=1}^n R_{kj} r_i M_i$$

Where: S_{NK} represents the criterion item, $N=A, B, C, D, k=1, 2, 3, i=1, 2, 3, \dots, n$ (n is the final number of items within each criterion level). R_{kj} represents the weight of the item level, kj represents the number of different sub-items at the item level. r_i represents the weight of each item in the criterion level after passing the threshold condition screening. M_i represents the proportion score of each item.

4.1.3. Integration Process

Through the early construction of the indicator system, the evaluation results are used to select courses. By coupling multiple aspects, initial customized special course plans are formulated. After continuous involvement and experimentation, the final course plans are obtained, resulting in four courses that meet various objectives and requirements.

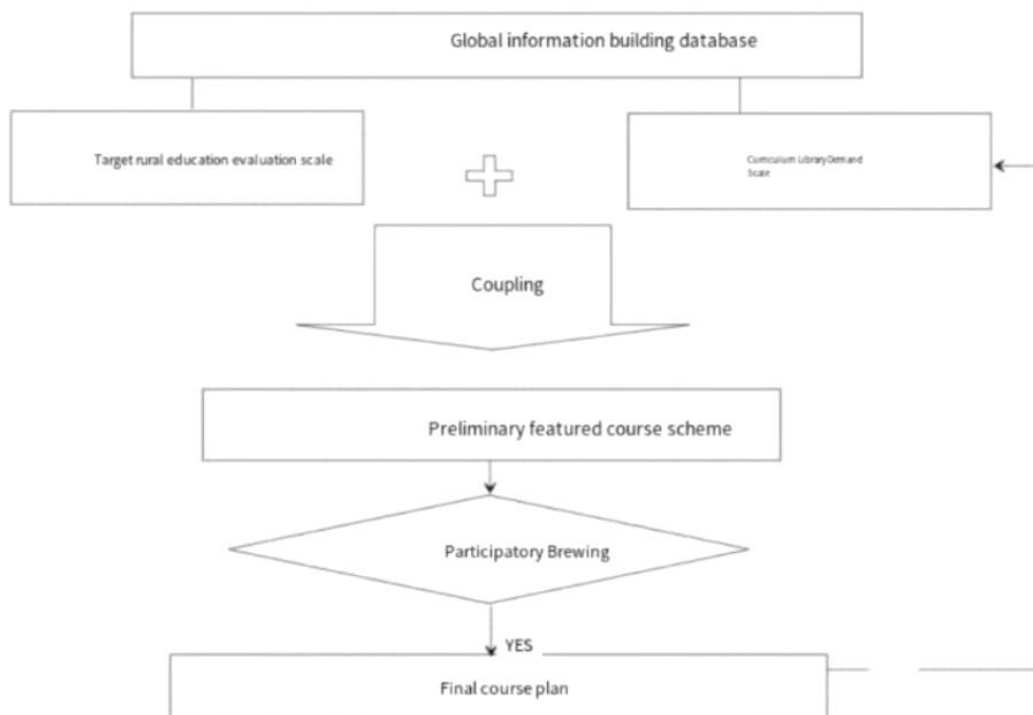


Figure 2: Integration Process.

4.2. Construction of a Specialized Activity Curriculum System - A Case Study of Yantianzi Village in Hong Kong

4.2.1. Specific Location Background

Yantianzi, also known as Yantianzai, is located in Sai Kung, Hong Kong. In the past, the residents of this area relied on salt production and agriculture for their livelihoods. However, traditional salt production declined, leading to economic stagnation, cultural conservation challenges, and the loss of ancient salt-making techniques. In recent years, with the development of art festivals and tourism, the number of tourists from outside the area has increased. Nevertheless, many local middle-aged and young adults still work in the city, leaving behind left-behind children, and there is a lack of cultural heritage and insufficient conservation of natural culture. From an educational perspective, it is necessary to focus on children, involve various community groups, and integrate aspects related to nature, local culture, ancient skills, tourism economy, and art festival activities.

4.2.2. Construction of the Specialized Activity Curriculum System

4.2.2.1. Cultural Nurturing: Knowledge Expansion Classes

Yantianzi is a small island that combines Catholic and Hakka cultures. Cultural knowledge courses can include content related to culture, cultural relics, and mangrove conservation, among others. Through artistic design, children's knowledge base can be expanded, and their understanding of local culture can be deepened, thereby activating the intangible cultural characteristics of the rural area and reshaping the roots of local cultural relationships.

Using space art installations and children's behavior as carriers, an interactive relationship between input and output is established. From the perspectives of sociology, semiotics, media studies, environmental psychology, and behavioral psychology, art therapy-oriented spatial design is carried out to facilitate the efficient implementation of art education courses.

4.2.2.2. Psychological Communication: Card Exchange Meetings

Taking advantage of Yantianzi's religious characteristics, the curriculum focuses on psychological well-being and multisensory experiences, providing spiritual support. Anonymous cards are used as a medium for communication, allowing children to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment, addressing inner emotional deficiencies and blockages.

Participatory interactive courses play a role in shaping children's worldviews and relationships. Whether through participatory design or experiential games, they can stimulate children's focus and positive attitudes, helping to alleviate negative emotions such as depression and loneliness that result from being left behind. Rational design of spatial boundaries enhances social activities, combining natural surveillance with increased involvement of left-behind children. Through the use of color psychology, moods are soothed, positive attitudes are encouraged, and paranoid thinking is avoided.

4.2.2.3. Skill Development: Handicraft Sales Stall

Salt production was once the economic backbone of Yantianzi, but as villagers gradually moved away, Yantianzi became a vacant area. Conducting handicraft courses on the salt flats is an appropriate choice.

In the field of environmental behavior studies, human behavior is intertwined with the environment. People are influenced by the environment, but they also adapt to and change it. By providing immersive and engaging spaces, children are subtly influenced, and their behavior

continually changes. Children can personalize and display their handicrafts, transforming the sales stall space into a place created by children. Skill training and creativity are conducted on the salt flats, which not only utilize vacant land resources and existing salt resources but also redesign and create the forgotten salt flats.

The creative results produced by children after receiving art education are used for exhibition or monetization. Leveraging online media and other platforms to increase visibility, children can benefit economically. This creates a positive feedback loop, enabling children to feel their value and reducing the likelihood of engaging in negative behaviors such as theft or robbery.

4.2.2.4. Personality Cultivation: Vision Workshops

Setting correct values through early education, fostering complete personalities, and recognizing life directions and paths are essential. The curriculum space of the Vision Workshop has a narrative nature. The cross-research of architectural space and film has confirmed that architecture and film share a homogeneous language system. As Pascale Schutting stated, “The film’s construction of images encompasses the entity construction of architecture” [7]. Like film, architectural space constructs anatomical motion images, and the dynamic trajectories of living space and life narratives are intertwined.

Yantianzi Art Festival, which has the theme of “heaven, earth, and people,” is held annually. Currently, there are installation spaces such as “House of Missing People,” “Drifting Clouds and Waves,” “Rituals of Life,” and “Little Stories of Nature.” Leveraging the art festival, narrative workshops are created, arousing children’s curiosity through narrative and enhancing their sense of participation. This is beneficial for children’s artistic creations such as sculpture and painting, cultivating a positive mindset and thinking pattern, encouraging children to embark on the right and open path in life, and realizing their own value.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through methods such as field investigations and literature research, summarizes rural issues and the problems faced by rural children. It specifically focuses on the psychological and emotional aspects and creatively proposes the integration of participatory design with art education. Guided by the principles of human-centeredness, locality, and systematic design, and through the construction of an indicator system and the application of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), a systematic art education system based on the education of left-behind children has been designed. This system not only addresses the impracticality of current art education curricula but also offers a comprehensive and systematic solution to issues such as children’s economic sources, life skills acquisition, and self-awareness of life direction.

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