

Linking the School to Society: A Case Study on School-Community-Business Partnership in Labor Education

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Abstract: Amid the call for strengthening social practice in labor education as a national educational policy, schools in China are facing a three-fold challenge, namely a lack of a legal basis, inadequate resource support, and unpredictable educational outcomes, in developing off-campus labor practice education programs. This study is a case study of the “Clothing Reuse Charity” program at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School, China, to explore the implementation mechanism of school-community-business partnership in labor education. Theory-driven case illustration is adopted as the research method. The results show that the school successfully integrated labor education into real social production processes in collaboration with the community and business. The study reveals a dynamic pattern of the evolution of the relationship between the three parties, from a school-led one to a genuine partnership. It also outlines two transferable principles for off-campus labor practice education programs – actively seeking community support to secure their legal status and attracting the business to engage for their public-benefit nature, thereby providing a workable pathway for extending labor education from the campus to authentic social production settings.

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Introduction

LABOR PRACTICE is the primary component of labor education, which is intended to foster not just students' labor skills but also their understanding of society and awareness of social participation (Zhang, 2018). In China, the 2018 National Education Conference re-established labor education as an integral part of the all-round education policy, namely the policy of "equal emphasis on five domains of education" (moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetical, and labor education). The State Council of China's (2020) Guidelines on Comprehensively Strengthening Labor Education for Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education Students in the New Era stipulate that labor education should be integrated into the entire process of talent cultivation, emphasizing expanding off-campus labor practice programs through multiple channels, adapting labor education to technological advances and industrial transformation, and paying attention to changes in social services brought about by emerging technologies. Policies like these has elevated labor education to an unprecedented strategic standing while also imposing much higher standards on its implementation.

Nevertheless, prioritizing social practice in labor education is not easy in its actual enactment. The challenge Chinese schools face in extending labor education to out-of-school settings is three-fold: (i) a lack of a legal basis. Schools' activities as educational institutions have definite legal boundaries. Often, they have difficulty securing authoritative permits for their students' participation in off-campus labor practice, leaving the legitimacy of their involvement in social production activities questionable. (ii) inadequate resource support. Student social practice in labor education requires physical resources, such as venues and equipment, as well as specialist instructors (Cao, 2021; Li & Zhao, 2022); yet, schools, with relatively fixed financial funds and human resources, can hardly independently bear the costs of creating and operating social practice programs for labor education. (iii) unpredictable educational outcomes. Even if schools can afford to organize off-campus labor practice for their students, the risk remains that without systematic labor education design and effective guidance, the latter may only obtain fragmentary labor experiences rather than achieving comprehensive development in labor skills, attitudes, and values.

Traditionally, there have been two main coping strategies for the said challenges in Chinese basic education. First, local education authorities are held responsible for the planning and construction of off-campus

labor practice bases, which are used in rotation by schools under their jurisdiction. Second, labor education is commissioned to non-educational institutions which provide specialist services. However, both practices have obvious limitations. The first relies solely on public funding, lacking operational adaptability and potential of sustainable development, with which students are merely passive users of the bases without a voice or productive participation in their activities. The second have issues such as difficulty in ensuring educational quality and possible conflicts between commercial interests and educational objectives. As a result, it is imperative to explore labor education implementation paradigms that can both overcome schools' resource constraints and ensure educational quality.

Among current educational collaboration experiments in China, the school-community-business partnership mechanism has the potential to become a new pathway to labor education. School-community-business partnership is an approach particularly effective in promoting student all-round development by leveraging the resources and advantages of the three parties. Yet, existing research on this approach is mainly confined to the domains of moral and intellectual education with few studies investigating its application in labor education. Moreover, because of the practical nature of labor education and its concern with real-world issues, its implementation inevitably involves a more complicated institutional environment and more interests. Hence, there is a need to undertake targeted theoretical analysis and practical exploration of school-community-business collaboration in labor education.

Against this backdrop, this study proposes research questions as follows:

RQ1: How can labor education be embedded in authentic social production through school-community-business partnership?

RQ1a: How do the roles of the school, community, and business evolve dynamically across different stages of the partnership?

To answer these questions, the study adopts the “theory-driven case illustration” method and uses the Clothing Reuse Charity (CRC) program at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School, Zhejiang Province, China, as an example to conduct an in-depth analysis of the school-community-business partnership mechanism in labor education. The goal is to provide theoretical and practical insights for the enactment of social practice in labor education in China.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Literature Review: The Implications of Dewey’s Experiential Education Theory on Labor Education

John Dewey’s experiential education theory posits that education is basically the reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1986; Demetrian, 2022). In Dewey’s view, education is not simply an infusion of prescribed knowledge into students, but a dynamic, ongoing process in which learners continuously reconstruct their knowledge structures and behavioral patterns through active interaction with the environment. He also highlighted the two fundamental principles of experiential education, namely the principles of continuity and interaction. The principle of continuity emphasizes that experiences are not isolated events but a sequential, interconnected series: each present experience must be connected to previous knowledge and pave the way for future learning. This principle holds significant implications for the design of labor education curricula: The development of student labor skills should be progressive, following a pattern of advancing from simple to complex ones and accommodating immediate value and future growth, enabling students to build up their labor competence through continuous accumulation of labor experiences. The principle of interaction stresses that quality learning happens when the external, environmental conditions well match the student’s internal needs. This means that an effective labor education curriculum must provide authentic scenarios that engage students both physically and mentally and facilitate their cognitive and emotional growth in the process of hands-on manipulation.

“Learning by doing,” advocated by Dewey, represents a typical teaching practice underpinned by his experiential education theory. Dewey argued that the school should become a miniature society, where students acquire knowledge, develop abilities, and build character by engaging in various meaningful activities (Dewey, 1986; Chang & Luo, 2017). Such activities are not aimless play but “occupations” with clear educational objectives; they simulate or are genuine parts of social production processes, enabling students to learn through practical hands-on work and grasp the meaning of abstract concepts through authentic problem-solving. The concept of “occupations” is useful in shedding light on the higher-order value of labor education - that is, promoting cognitive and non-cognitive development as well as fostering appropriate values in students, which is of great significance for correcting the stereotype that labor education means nothing more than a certain amount of manual work or physically burdensome experience.

Analytical Framework

The study's analytical framework consists of two dimensions:

- Dimension 1: Role and Responsibility Analysis (addressing RQ1a). This dimension focuses on the role and responsibility assumption dynamics among the school, community, and business across different stages of the collaborative program, examining how each party undertakes distinct responsibilities as the program evolves, as well as the changes in the tripartite relationships.
- Dimension 2: Legitimacy-Resource Backing-Educational Outcomes Interactivity Analysis (addressing RQ1). In response to the three-fold challenge of social practice in labor education faced by schools, namely a lack of a legal basis, inadequate resource support, and unpredictable educational outcomes, this dimension is devoted to analyzing how school-community-business partnership can achieve successful interaction and breakthroughs in three aspects. In terms of legitimacy, how can a collaborative program provide legal assurance for student participation in labor practice, making it a protected public-benefit activity? Regarding resource backing, how do the business's material inputs and the school's curriculum design capabilities complement each other, enabling the program to operate independently without government funding? As to the program's educational outcomes, do students fully comprehend the purpose of labor education through the actual steps of a real-world labor activity.

Research Methodology

This study adopts theory-driven case illustration as its research method, which emphasizes the use of a theoretical framework to guide in-depth analysis of a certain case. The analytical results can test the explanatory power of the framework while also enhancing its conceptual maturity by drawing on case-specific details.

The case examined in this study is the CRC program at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School, a public-benefit nonbusiness entity specializing in promoting second-hand clothing reuse and recycling, which has been in operation since March 2023. The distinctiveness of the case is evidenced by the following facts: First, the program has been running continuously for over three years, with a clearly identifiable tripartite collaboration mechanism involving the school, community, and business; second, it has

undergone a complete trajectory from having no legal bases to gaining multiple, robust legal bases; third, it has generated verifiable educational outcomes and public value.

The study sources data from: (i) organizational documents, such as the CRC program’s registration filing materials, constitutions and regulations, financial statements, and volunteer profiles; (ii) historical records, including student logs, teacher work notes, meeting minutes, and communication records; (iii) publicity reports, such as news coverage by local media and commendation documents from government departments. The cross-validation of multiple sources helps enhance the reliability and validity of the research.

Description of the Case: The Evolution of the CRC Program

Stage One: Germination

In March 2023, the first-year students at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School organized an across-the-board survey on household waste sorting in urban areas of Yuyao City. The survey results showed that the infrastructure for waste sorting in the city remained underdeveloped, hindering the enforcement of full-scale waste segregation. In response to this situation, the students proposed an improvement recommendation: prioritizing preliminary sorting to reduce total waste volume first as a preparation for full-scale classification in the future. During the survey, the students noticed the emergence of second-hand clothing collection bins on the city streets and regarded them as a workable device for preliminary waste sorting. Consequently, the idea of having a part in second-hand clothing reuse and recycling germinated in their mind.

First, they initiated a partnership with Wansheng Di, the owner of these collection bins and a native of Anhui Province. Di had been engaged in the business of used clothing recycling for many years, with rich industrial experience and abundant resources, including collection sites, transportation equipment, and stable connections with the downstream chain. With the partnership project, the students gained an intuitive understanding of the used clothing recycling industry by going through with Di all the processes of deploying collection bins, collecting used clothing, sorting and packaging, in addition to mailing second-hand clothes to persons in need.

At this stage, the school-community-business partnership was apparently a school-dominated effort: The school (specifically the supervising teachers and student team leaders) acted as the program's initiator and organizer, responsible for defining activity directions and coordinating relationships, with ordinary students participating as volunteers, undertaking tasks such as surveys, publicity, and assistance with collection; the business provided material conditions, including operation sites and equipment, as well as practical experience; and the community had not yet become truly involved and remained an onlooker to student activities. Despite the limited scale, the effort at this stage laid the groundwork for deeper cooperation, while questions on the program's legality also began to arise.

Stage Two: Crisis and Community Intervention

Ensuing the CRC program's initial success was a major crisis, the crisis of legitimacy. Without an official permit from the municipal administration, the program was ruled a violation of the Urban Street Management Regulations for its deployment of used clothing collection bins on the roadside. The city inspection authorities imposed penalties and confiscated three collection bins, while the rest were required to be removed from public places. This event plunged the school into a dilemma: continuing operating the program might face legal issues, but terminating it would render all previous efforts futile.

Witnessing the predicament of the program, Xincheng Neighborhood in Yangming Subdistrict, Yuyao City, offered support to the school in a timely manner. Considering the public-benefit nature and educational value of the program, the neighborhood proposed to establish it as community-filed entity, allowing continuation of its operation within the neighborhood. As a result, the program obtained a legitimate identity, running as a volunteer organization under the neighborhood committee, which signaled recognition and backing for it from the immediate local community. This advancement was of vital significance: With the local community shifting from being a bystander to sponsor and the school from the leader to coordinator, a more balanced tripartite collaborative pattern began to take shape.

Following the neighborhood's mediation, the program's operation became more stable. The neighborhood continued to offer procedural support, the business provided operation sites, equipment, funds, and dedicated staff, ensuring a material foundation and management backing for the program, and the students gained public commendation for their pub-

lic-spirited acts, showcasing the educational value of the program. The efforts of the three parties complemented each other, accelerating the formation of a mature co-education program. At this stage, the students volunteered to organize three large-scale donation events to help the impoverished, showing the public how to donate second-hand clothing (largely in good condition) properly, which earned praise from the media and support from the public, thereby building up social capital for the subsequent official registration of the program.

Stage Three: Official Registration and Legal Status

After the program ran as a community-filed entity for a certain period, the CRC team moved to secure official legal status for it by applying for registration with the civil affairs department. Endorsed by the neighborhood and school, the team submitted a registration application to the Yuyao Civil Affairs Bureau. Following a set of review procedures, the application was successfully approved, with the CRC program being registered as a nonbusiness entity specializing in used clothing recycling. As a result, the program secured legal status, embodying its being officially recognized as a legal person by the official legal system.

At the same time, the program's operation paradigm and social value were also recognized by the public. Amid substantial media coverage and word-of-mouth dissemination of the story among citizens, the program progressively established its reputation as a public-benefit effort. An increased number of citizens were ready to donate their unused clothing to this student-run program. The recognition of its legitimacy from the neighborhood, government department, and Yuyao citizens across the board formed the bedrock of the program's normalized operation.

With the official registration, the program entered a period of rapid expansion, featured by: (i) cross-regional expansion - its scope having extended from Yuyao to Cixi, Fenghua, and other regions; (ii) an increased number of student participants – engaging cumulatively over 500 student volunteers; (iii) official recognition from educational authorities – the school was designated as a pilot school for primary and secondary labor practice education in Zhejiang Province; and (iv) the Top Prize it won at the National Secondary School Student Leadership Exhibition, signaling its becoming an exemplary student-led charity.

Stage Four: Sustainable Operation

Table 1. Evolution of the Roles of the School, Community, and Business in Labor Education Partnership.

Stages	School's Roles	Community's Roles	Business/NGO's Roles
Germination	Initiator, Organizer	Not Involved	Material Support Provider
Legitimacy Predicament	Seeker of Help, Coordinator	Legal Sponsor	Determined Supporter
Legalized Status	Curriculum Designer	Supervisor, Promoter	Operation Manager
Sustenance	Partner	Monitor of Regulations	Platform Maintainer

Years of efforts have developed the CRC program into a stable tripartite partnership model: The neighborhood committee acted as the supervisor and promoter of the program, providing procedural support and legal endorsement while also monitoring that the program sustained as a charity effort; Wansheng Di and his team were responsible for the management of the program’s routine operation including collection bin maintenance, clothing transport, sorting and processing, to ensure the program’s financial sustainability; and the school integrated the program into its “comprehensive practice” curriculum, designing systematic labor education plans, organizing student participation in an orderly fashion, and guiding the students in reflecting on their labor experiences.

At this stage, the program’s educational outcomes and public value advanced in parallel, reinforcing each other. From an educational perspective, the students acquired a complete labor experience through the actual manipulation of collecting, sorting second-hand clothes, and sending a portion of them to persons in need, with which they gained comprehensive development in labor skills, attitudes, and values, resulting in notably enhanced awareness of social responsibility. Regarding its social outcomes, the program could gather over 100 tons of second-hand clothing annually from Yuyao, Cixi, and Fenghua, and has aided large numbers of impoverished people in four provincial administrative regions (Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Tibet), generating significant public and environmental benefits. The combination of educational and social outcomes makes the program distinctive among all labor education efforts.

Analysis of the School-Community-Business Partnership Mechanism for Labor Education

Dynamics of Roles: Responding to RQ1a

From the history of the CRC program, a clear pattern of dynamic evolution of the roles of the school, community, and business is observed. **Ta-**

ble 1 displays the changes in the roles of the three parties across various stages

When the partnership is in the stage of germination, the school is unquestionably the chief actor with the teachers guiding their students in conducting surveys, seeking partners, and designing labor practice plans, and the students participate in social practice following the school's arrangements. The business typically takes part at the school's request for support. The partnership at this stage is based on the school's need for external support; in other words, the school needs to "utilize" the business's resources to achieve the objectives of labor education.

In tackling the legitimacy crisis of its off-campus labor education programs, the school experiences a significant shift in its role from a chief actor to a seeker of help and coordinator. The school as an educational institution cannot resolve legitimacy issues with the said programs on its own and must turn to the community for help. The community's involvement changes the structure of the partnership; it participates as a key actor by providing the legal basis for these programs. An important message from the change is that in implementing the social practice curriculum in labor education, the school cannot and should not try to solve all issues by itself; instead, it must learn to leverage the community's power to overcome institutional constraints.

Subsequent to the acquisition of legal status of the partnership, the roles of the three parties become further differentiated: The school concentrates on its educational role, focusing on labor education curriculum design and implementation guidance; the community takes on the administrative responsibilities as a supervisor and a promoter of the collaborative program; and the business becomes the manager of its operation. At this stage, each party plays to its strengths, forming relatively stable division of labor.

In the following period of sustenance, the tripartite partnership can lead to the establishment of a public-benefit nonbusiness entity as an independent actor, which is not controlled by any of the three parties alone. The school gradually shifts from being the dominant actor to being a labor education curriculum designer and executor, and its relationship with the community and business transitions from a support-based relationship to a partnership on an equal basis. The shifts are of vital significance for the partnership mechanism in that the school stops being the sole accountable side but rather a key link in the tripartite collaborative network, and that the sustainable development of the labor education effort no longer depends on the unilateral input of the school but is grounded on the interests of all three parties.

Integrating Labor Education into Authentic Social Production: Responding to RQ1

The successful enactment of the CRC program demonstrates that school-community-business partnership is an effective approach to addressing the three-fold challenge faced by the school's social practice curriculum in labor education: a lack of the legal basis, inadequate resource support, and unpredictable educational outcomes. This section analyzes how the three issues can be resolved with the tripartite partnership mechanism.

The Issue of Legitimacy: From a Legally Doubtful Practice to an Officially Recognized Charity Effort

The dearth of a legal basis is the primary barrier to the school's implementation of off-campus labor practice education. Under the existing education legislation framework, creating programs for the students to participate in social production activities is clearly beyond the functional boundaries of the school. Nevertheless, student involvement in social production can become a legally protected practice as evidenced by the CRC program's acquisition of legal status through its registration with the government agency sponsored by the neighborhood. Specifically, the program established its legitimacy by obtaining the neighborhood's endorsement – approval from the immediate local authority; by being officially accredited by the civil affairs bureau as a public-benefit nonbusiness entity, thereby securing legal person status; and by generating positive social outcomes, which were widespread through media publicity and word-of-mouth dissemination of the citizens. The mixture of the three levels of legitimacy set the stage for the program's sustainable development.

More importantly, the advancements in legitimacy themselves serves to be a meaningful educational resource. In the process of the program being legalized, the students witnessed how citizens act, negotiate, and cooperate as members of society, and learnt about the institutional logic of social organizations. This kind of experiential learning is impossible to occur in the classroom setting.

The Issue of Resources: Integration of Complementary Resources

Social practice in labor education requires a wide range of resources, which cannot be provided by the school alone. In the case of the CRC program, the school-community-business collaboration mechanism

demonstrates substantial power to pool resources essential for its survival and development. The business is held responsible for supplying physical material resources like venues and equipment, as well as financial and management resources, the school for designing labor education curricula and organizing human resources, i.e., the student participants, and the neighborhood for providing administrative resources, ensuring the legitimate status of the program.

Central to the success of this resource integration model is its ability to meet the needs of each individual party: The business wins a favorable reputation as being socially responsible through participation in charity efforts while also securing a source of used clothing, reaching a desirable balance between commercial interests and corporate social responsibility; the school leverages out-of-school resources to provide students with real-world labor practice opportunities without increasing its own financial burden; and the community reinforces its governance capacity and social influence by supporting public-benefit efforts. The model's capacity to addressing the concerns of all three parties lays a solid foundation for the tripartite partnership.

In addition, a more covert but valuable educational outcome of the resource integration model is that students, by observing the tripartite collaboration process, develop understanding about the basic principles underpinning division of labor and social cooperation, recognizing the concerns and interaction logic of various social actors. This understanding of society as a whole is an important goal of labor education.

The Issue of Educational Outcomes: From Physical Effort to Cultivation of Awareness of Social Responsibility

Labor education in the new era pursues student all-round development for social advancement across the board (Qu, 2019). The CRC program illustrates how students, in a real-world social production context, experience a complete labor procedure, resulting in improved practical skills, attitudes, and values.

Within the CRC program, the students fully participated in the processes of collecting, sorting, packing, and arranging transport for the clothes donated, acquiring practical knowledge and skills in used clothing recycling and learning about the basics of the circular economy. Through experiencing ordinary people's work, the students understood how labor creates value, developing appropriate attitudes towards labor including respect for labor and love of work. On the level of value cultivation, the students developed qualities like perseverance and resilience when going

through the program's legitimacy crisis; also, witnessing the donated clothes were useful to people in impoverished areas, they realized the connections between the individual's labor, the well-being of others, and social progress, which fostered their senses of social responsibility and public spirit.

One student participant wrote in a reflection journal, "In the past, I thought of labor as just onerous work, yet the labor education experience with the CRC program teaches me that labor can be meaningful and helpful to others. When I saw the photos of the clothes donated reaching the mountainous areas of Yunnan Province and worn by children there, I felt that all our effort was worth it." This reflection vividly illustrates the social significance of labor education, revealing that integrating labor practice in authentic social relationships can lead to spontaneous generation of its educational value.

Discussions and Conclusions

The research is a case study of the CRC program at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School, aiming to conduct an in-depth analysis of the school-community-business partnership mechanism in labor education. The study finds that, through school-community-business partnership, the school can successfully implement labor education in authentic social production settings, with the community intervening to bring legal status for the program, the business resolving the issue of resource constraints for its sustainable development, and the students, from the program's evolution, acquiring impressive civic education experiences, resulting in comprehensive enhancement of their labor skills, attitudes, and values.

The study reveals dynamic adjustment of the relationship between the three parties, from a school-dominated pattern to a genuine partnership. In the period of germination of an off-campus labor education program, the school typically acts as the leader. When encountering crises, the school becomes an active seeker of help and coordinator. In seeking legitimacy for the program, the three parties make most of their respective roles and collaborate based on division of responsibility. Finally, the established program becomes an independent entity, with the tripartite relationship developing into an equal partnership. This evolution trajectory suggests that effective school-community-business partnership in labor education is not a static existence but a dynamic process.

A significant contribution of this study is its identification of a new role for the school as the initiator of public-benefit efforts. In prior school-community-business collaboration patterns, the school typically

counts as a consumer of out-of-school resources, focusing on identifying, integrating, and utilizing existing resources from communities and businesses for labor education purposes. The present case study differs from previous research by identifying a new role for the school as an initiator of charity efforts, who not only strives to mobilize all sorts of resources but also endeavors to create a fresh collaborative public-benefit platform, integrating separate forces into a structured labor education program. This finding expands the explanatory boundaries of school-community-business collaboration theory, highlighting the initiative and creativity of schools in educational partnerships.

Additionally, the study contributes to labor education literature by looking into the legitimacy issue of off-campus labor practice education programs. The reason why labor education struggles to extend beyond the school campus is primarily because of the lack of a legal basis for the school creating social practice programs for labor education independently. With the endorsement from the neighborhood, approval by the government agency, and the social outcomes it achieved, the CRC program showcases a lawful pathway for student participation in real-world labor. This experience has its implications for breaking down constraints for labor practice education in out-of-school settings.

The study draws two transferable principles from the successful implementation of the CRC program. First, the school should actively seek support from the community to establish legal standing for its off-campus labor practice education programs. In China, the local community as the grassroots governance body has certain administrative powers and broad social networks, enabling it to endorse and support the school's social practice education programs. Second, helping the business fulfil its corporate social responsibility and earn a good reputation is highly effective in motivating it to participate in the school's charity programs. The primary motivations for the business's educational participation include building talent pipelines and maintaining positive social networks, in addition to fulfilling social responsibility and improving goodwill. Therefore, the school should fully consider the business's concerns in developing co-education programs and optimize the match between its educational objectives and the latter's corporate interests, so as to achieve win-win outcomes.

The present study has its limitations, which need to be addressed in future research. First off, it is based on a single case, i.e., the CRC program at Yuyao No.4 Senior High School, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could conduct multi-case comparative studies to examine the implementation mechanisms of school-

community-business labor education partnerships in different types of schools, different regions, and different industry contexts, to improve its external validity. Moreover, there is the possibility of researcher bias. The author’s standpoint as a participant of the program may influence the analytical results. To enhance their objectivity, future research could engage completely independent researchers to conduct confirmatory studies or encourage other participants to comment on the research conclusions. Also, the evaluation of the program’s educational outcomes relies mainly on the students’ reflective journals and self-reports, lacking quantifiable pre- and post-test comparative assessments. Future research could design more systematic educational outcome evaluation tools, including the labor attitudes scale, labor skills test, and behavioral observations, to more accurately assess the actual effects of school-community-business partnership in labor education.

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