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DILEMMAS AND RELIEF STRATEGIES FOR RURAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the professional development dilemmas faced by rural teachers in the context of high-quality rural education development and proposes solutions. It analyzes the challenges rural teachers face in professional identity, professional competence, and local knowledge, while suggesting solutions including enhancing professional identity, building professional learning communities, strengthening internal motivation, and implementing targeted training programs. These aims to promote rural teachers' professional growth and advance high-quality development of rural education.

KEYWORDS: *Rural teacher professional development; Dilemmas; Relief strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 20th National Congress report clearly states that high-quality development is the primary task in building a modern socialist society (Xi Jinping, 2022). Promoting high-quality development of rural education is one of the "fundamental and strategic supports". In his talk with representatives of Beijing Normal University faculty and students, President Xi pointed out: "We need to cultivate a high-quality professional teaching force that demonstrates noble professional ethics, excellent professional skills, reasonable structure, and full vitality" (Xi Jinping, 2014). Evidently, teacher professional development is a crucial foundation for rural education development (Zuo & Wu, 2019). For rural education to achieve high quality, rural teachers must pursue professional development (Peng, 2020). However, in reality, rural teachers are often labeled as "low quality, low ability", generally showing weak professional identity (Li & Fang, 2018), rigid teaching methods (Li, Guo, & Yang, 2022), hindered professional development (Zhao, 2019), difficulty in identity integration (Jiang, Jiang, & Li, 2021), and cognitive biases about rural education (Sun & Zhou, 2021). In recent years, the state has continuously increased efforts to train rural teachers, clearly requiring solutions to rural teachers' development challenges, enhancing teachers' teaching abilities, and retaining real talent. Under policy guidance, this research focuses on the real dilemmas faced by rural teachers' professional development in the context of high-quality education development and considers corresponding solutions.

2. CURRENT STATUS OF RURAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Currently, an increasing number of scholars recognize that rural teachers' professional development significantly determines the quality of rural education development. Cao Ke, Li Zhihui (2023), Yuan Fang, Tian Guoping (2023), and others have conducted status studies on rural teachers in different regions, revealing development issues. Taking the western Guangdong region as an example, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 rural teachers from Guangning County, Huaiji County, Fengkai County, Deqing County, and other areas under Zhaoqing City through convenience sampling to understand their current professional development issues. Analysis shows that most (23, 92%) rural teachers reported high work pressure, poor environment, and lower salaries compared to urban areas, stating "having to teach both Chinese and Music" and "often lacking energy to think about professional development". Some teachers (17, 68%) directly expressed their low educational background and shallow understanding of professional development concepts, acknowledging they were still in early stages of professional development. They expressed hope for improving their professional level but currently lack adequate policy and social support, with training being too general and ineffective for their professional development. Some teachers (13, 52%) reflected on themselves, noting emerging professional burnout, saying they "no longer carry educational enthusiasm like before, but just treat it as a job for survival". This shows that rural teachers' current professional development status is not

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optimistic, with low educational quality, heavy teaching workload, poor working environment, and inadequate policy and social support leading to their lack of proper understanding and capability for professional development.

3. PROBLEMS FACED IN RURAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Currently, a considerable portion of scholars have noticed the dilemmas in rural teachers' professional development. Wu Yunpeng (2021), Li Xiaohong et al. (2022), and others have summarized rural teachers' professional development difficulties from multiple perspectives including professional development, identity recognition, and policy support. Further analyzing teachers' problems in the context of rural high-quality development will help clarify reality and find solutions.

3.1 Identity and Professional Recognition Dilemma

Rural teachers face practical issues like heavy workload and poor teaching environment. Under enormous work and psychological pressure, they are more prone to professional burnout, affecting their professional identity. According to Gao Mengjie (2021), Zhu Xiuhong, Liu Shanhuai (2020)'s survey, rural teachers' average weekly class hours are 17.35, with each rural teacher teaching an average of 2.65 subjects, and most teachers need to teach across grades. The prevalence of small-scale schools in rural areas, complex student demographics, and insufficient teaching resources result in heavy educational tasks for rural teachers, often leading to "multiple classes, multiple subjects, multiple grade teaching" phenomena. Meanwhile, they must undertake work such as student activities and parent communication. Workload beyond reasonable limits not only dilutes the charm of educational life but also invisibly consumes rural teachers' enthusiasm and energy, affecting their identification with their educational role and recognition of the teaching profession.

For a long period in the past, rural teachers relied on their cultural capital to become rural elite, carrying social functions of imparting knowledge and educating villagers, and accordingly receiving full respect (Liu, 2022). However, rapid socio-economic development and increased urban-rural mobility have influenced villagers' value judgment of rural teachers' identity. Their roles and status have become increasingly marginalized, making it difficult to gain past respect and recognition, gradually descending from rural elites to laborers. The former halo of being "the most educated person" in rural areas has faded, and these external environmental changes have made rural teachers increasingly insecure and uncertain, also causing their identity and professional recognition dilemma.

3.2 Lack of Local Knowledge and Missing Rural Commitment

Behind rural teachers' low identity and professional recognition lies some rural teachers' disconnection from rural environment and life, making them very unfamiliar with their local space and further causing their "outsider" and "marginal person" identity dilemma. In fact, some rural teachers come from cities or other rural areas, feeling quite unfamiliar with local subcultures, values, lifestyles, and educational traditions. Lack of understanding about agriculture, rural areas, and farmers distances teachers from students and prevents teachers from connecting with students' families, all hindering teachers' better integration into the local rural environment. Meanwhile, unfamiliarity with local culture and educational traditions will affect teachers' ability to conduct active and effective teaching, making it difficult to adapt to local conditions and teach according to students' abilities. Teaching practice becomes formalistic, merely completing tasks, making high-quality rural education development impossible to achieve. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, awkward identity situations and scarce local knowledge make some teachers feel powerless, thus losing internal drive and belief for active development. Many rural teachers try various ways to leave rural areas or treat rural teaching positions as "stepping stones" to return to cities, unable to take root in rural areas and deeply cultivate rural education. Rural teachers' lack of rural commitment and sense of ownership will make rural education difficult to revitalize and rural talent difficult to cultivate.

3.3 Inadequate Professional Competence

Some rural teachers have problems with insufficient professional knowledge and lacking professional skills. When preparing lessons, they only focus on preparing teaching materials and methods while neglecting special educational objects widely existing in rural education - left-behind children, thus unable to grasp key and difficult points in teaching and effectively teach according to students' abilities. Of course, this is also related to the reality of quality teachers flowing to urban schools. Excellent graduates from normal universities are unwilling to go deep into rural areas, existing rural teaching staff generally have low levels, and there are major deficiencies in teaching concepts and organizational management abilities (Miao & Zong, 2017). Meanwhile, quite a number of teachers in identity dilemma

only treat education as a means of livelihood, neither voluntarily choosing normal majors nor voluntarily engaging in rural education. After entering work, facing huge psychological gaps and unable to accept current situations, they naturally cannot wholeheartedly devote themselves to work and also lose self-development motivation, entering a vicious cycle of mutual negative influence between sense of identity and professional competence. Over time, teachers' professional competence regresses rather than progresses, unable to keep pace with educational reform and development.

3.4 Insufficient External Support and Resource Constraints

Rural teachers lack adequate support from policy, society, and educational systems in their professional development process, receive limited in-service training opportunities, and face content misalignment with actual teaching needs, preventing effective enhancement of their professional capabilities. Although there are some policy preferences for rural education development under rural revitalization strategy, they may lack specificity and precision, making policy effects unclear. Teachers' alienation from rural society has also, to some extent, blocked channels for rural teachers to obtain professional development resources, limiting teachers' accessible and controllable development resources to within rural schools. However, most rural schools generally lack human, material, and financial resources, which undoubtedly leads to severe shortage of resources that can be invested in rural teachers' professional development.

4. STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING RURAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DILEMMAS

Rural teachers face many deficiencies and limitations in their survival and development environment. Considering strategies to address teachers' development dilemmas is essential for truly promoting high-quality rural education development.

4.1 Enhancing Professional Identity and Cultivating Rural Commitment

Rural teachers should deeply understand rural education's uniqueness, gradually refine rational understanding of rural education and teacher roles, form correct concepts about rural education work, reshape identification with their identity and role, and constantly remind themselves to avoid falling into urban-rural "marginal person" cognitive quagmire. On this basis, further cultivate rural commitment, truly regard themselves as rural members, actively pay attention to rural affairs, actively participate in local social practice, fully understand political, economic, and cultural development status of rural society beyond schools, enhance practicality of their professional development, while also closely linking their development with rural development. Especially in the context of high-quality rural education development, rural teachers should more deeply integrate into rural areas, not only being guides for rural children but also contributors to rural construction, shine in their positions, and stimulate new vitality in rural cultural inheritance.

4.2 Building Teacher Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) is a model for teacher professional development, an organization aimed at teacher professional development as its ultimate goal, sharing experiences and making progress together around learning needs and practical teaching issues (Gong, 2019). Through professional learning communities, rural teachers can obtain stress relief among groups with similar situations and dilemmas, and then jointly seek professional development. This can be constructed through the following forms: ① Theme-based learning, such as open class exchanges, lectures, seminars, etc., to improve professional competence; ② Online or offline workshop training activities, jointly studying lesson examples, classroom management, moral education, school-family communication, rural practice participation and other content, mutual class observation, evaluation, and competitions, promoting teachers' continuous development; ③ Joint participation in rural education-related research projects, selecting common directions for educational teaching problems, formulating research plans, conducting educational investigations, forming research reports and papers and other achievements, jointly building a community of rural education research.

4.3 Improving Professional Competence and Strengthening Internal Drive

Rural teachers' professional competence determines their professional development status and level. Only by maintaining strong and lasting self-development internal drive can teachers continuously overcome difficulties and achieve goals. Rural teachers should first form conscious professional development awareness, clearly recognize their subject responsibility in professional development, clarify goals, and plan scientifically. Second, they should actively broaden knowledge structure, pay attention to local knowledge, and construct knowledge systems suitable for rural

education needs. Third, they should pay attention to continuously training self-development ability in practice, strengthening internal drive. Gradually change old, programmatic daily teaching, strive to create teaching practices with local rural characteristics that are attractive and innovative. Finally, rural teachers' educational passion is an important internal driving factor for their professional development, making rural teachers not entangled in interest trade-offs or struggling with development troubles, always maintaining development belief and confidence. Rural teachers should always uphold educational original intentions, deepen their passion for rural education through identity reconstruction, attention to rural life reality, and practice engagement, continuously stimulating and cultivating love and dedication to rural education.

4.4 Implementing Precise Training for Rural Teachers

National and local authorities need to further emphasize rural teachers' professional development training activities, enhancing training's targeting and precision. Based on rural teachers' actual needs, improve training content and methods, adopt innovative training models like "bringing in" and "going out", allowing more rural teachers to obtain opportunities for learning, research, and improvement. On one hand, control and optimize training content, fully understand training teachers' actual needs and current levels through questionnaires or interviews before training, fully grant rural teachers choice rights, enhance rural teachers' training effectiveness, while emphasizing training on new curriculum standards, new teaching materials, and new teaching methods and models. On the other hand, precisely design training methods, using online and offline combined approaches based on actual needs, comprehensively adopting expert lectures, discussion exchanges, and field observations. Furthermore, strengthen urban-rural linkage, promoting exchange and cooperation between rural and urban teachers through various forms. Meanwhile, strengthen post-training tracking services, understanding actual training effects and teachers' genuine evaluations and feedback. Thus, through more precise teacher training, awaken rural teachers' internal development drive, fully mobilize teachers' enthusiasm and initiative in dedicating themselves to high-quality rural education development.

5. CONCLUSION

This research, based on the strategic background of high-quality rural education development in the new era, systematically discusses rural teachers' professional development's practical dilemmas and coping strategies using qualitative research methods. Through in-depth interviews with 25 rural teachers in western Guangdong region and data analysis, the study finds that rural teachers face multiple intertwined challenges in their professional development process: First is the dual dilemma of identity and professional recognition, stemming from both objective factors such as heavy teaching tasks, poor working environment, and low salaries, and deeper social changes like rural teachers' declining social status and gradual devaluation of cultural capital. Second is insufficient local knowledge reserves and general lack of rural commitment, this deficiency not only leads to cultural barriers between teachers and rural society but also affects the targeting and effectiveness of educational teaching practice, making it difficult for rural teachers to truly take root in rural areas and serve rural communities. Third is the obvious stagnation in professional competence development, specifically manifesting as conservative and outdated teaching concepts, relatively insufficient teaching abilities, and inadequate internal drive for professional development. Fourth is the serious inadequacy of external support systems, with significant shortcomings in policy support, social support, and educational resource support, severely constraining rural teachers' professional development space.

Based on the above problem analysis, this study proposes systematic relief strategies from four dimensions: The primary task is to focus on enhancing rural teachers' professional identity and cultivating their rural commitment. Through guiding teachers to deeply understand rural education's unique value and contemporary mission, reshape their professional identity and role positioning, enabling them to truly integrate into rural society and fully demonstrate subjectivity in educational practice. Second, actively construct Professional Learning Communities (PLC) through diverse forms such as theme-based learning, workshop training, and research projects, building platforms and growth spaces for teachers' professional development, promoting collaborative development and mutual progress of rural teacher groups.

Third, continuously improve rural teachers' professional competence and strengthen their internal development momentum. On one hand, help teachers expand knowledge structure, update teaching concepts, and enhance teaching skills; on other hand, focus on cultivating their independent development ability and educational passion, enabling them to maintain continuous forward momentum on their professional development path. Fourth, implement precise teacher training systems through systematic measures such as in-depth needs assessment, scientific content

optimization, and innovative methods, effectively enhancing training's targeting and effectiveness, providing solid strong support for teachers' professional development.

The theoretical value of this research lies in deepening academic understanding of rural teachers' professional development issues, expanding theoretical horizons of rural education research, providing new ideas and methods for related research. Practical significance is reflected in providing operable ideas and plans for promoting rural teachers' professional development and advancing high-quality rural education development. However, this study still has certain limitations: relatively limited sample size, research area mainly concentrated in western Guangdong region. Future research can be further improved and deepened in aspects such as expanding sample range, deepening empirical analysis, and conducting cross-regional comparisons.

Based on research findings and in-depth discussion, this paper concludes that rural teachers' professional development is a complex project requiring systematic governance and overall advancement, needing coordinated efforts and sustained input from multiple subjects including government, schools, and society. Only by effectively solving various practical dilemmas and deep-level challenges faced by rural teachers in professional development can we truly stimulate their development vitality, enhance their educational teaching level, and thereby promote overall revitalization and high-quality development of rural education. This concerns not only the professional development and growth of the vast rural teacher group but also the future direction and development prospects of rural education, deserving continued attention and in-depth exploration by education researchers and practitioners. Under the strategic background of realizing educational modernization and rural revitalization, continuously deepening research on rural teachers' professional development and exploring effective support strategies will provide important theoretical guidance and practical reference for promoting high-quality development of rural education.

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