

Challenges and Recommendations in Building the Teaching Force for Rural Compulsory Education in China

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High-quality teaching staff is one of the key factors in the advancement of Chinese compulsory education. The purpose of this article is to pinpoint issues with teacher recruitment, retention, and training in rural areas, such as unbalanced employment mobility, unreasonable composition of staff, and impeded teacher professional development. Recommendations on improving rural school staffing are also made in the dimensions of government policies, in-service training, and social support.

Keywords: Rural Compulsory Education; Rural School Staffing; Rural Teachers; China

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Introduction

PROMOTING balanced compulsory education and strengthening the teaching force are two major strategic endeavors in China's recent educational development (1). Rural education has always been a vital component of the nation's compulsory education, and rural school staffing has long been a focus of attention in the educational community. In 2019, based on the nationwide implementation status of the 2018 Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of Teacher Education and Training in the New Era, the Ministry of Education of China proposed a key action plan for the next phase's teaching force building: increasing investment in rural school staffing (2). The recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers are crucial for the advancement of rural compulsory education in the new era. This article focuses on examining the issues with teacher staffing in rural compulsory education and puts forward pertinent recommendations.

Current Issues with Rural School Staffing

To support compulsory education development in rural areas, the Chinese government has issued a series of teacher supply augmentation policies such as the "County-Government-sponsored Unified Employment Program" (3), "Special Position Program" (4), "Rural Teacher Support Program" (5), and "Talent Support Program for Impoverished, Remote Border, and Ethnic Minority Areas" (6), significantly improving rural school teacher supply. Nevertheless, issues with teacher staffing in rural compulsory education schools still exist, including low retention of younger teachers, unreasonable composition of staff, relatively low professional competence of teachers, and more. These issues have gravely hindered the healthy development of rural compulsory education in China.

High Turnover of Rural Teachers

According to relevant data from the China Education Yearbook, the total number of full-time teachers in primary and secondary

schools in China increased by approximately 330,000 from 2012 to 2016, whereas the number of full-time teachers in rural schools decreased by roughly 500,000 (7). Chen's 2023 survey in R County, Guangxi Province, found that the turnover rate among young rural teachers rose from 1.2% in 2017 to 10% in 2021 (8). Due to the tremendous disparities in the economic development level between urban and rural areas and the uneven distribution of education resources between urban and rural schools, the employment mobility of rural teachers exhibits a pattern of extreme one-way outflow. According to Deng's 2019 investigation of teacher mobility in K District of Chongqing Region, a total of 301 primary school teachers transferred in the last seven years, with 68.9% of them from rural to urban schools but only 1.8% from urban to rural ones (9). In response to high turnover among rural teachers, more novice teachers have been recruited to compensate for the gap, but many of them would leave their rural jobs shortly.

Unreasonable Composition of Rural Teaching Staff

The low retention rate among young and middle-aged village schoolteachers leads to an undesirable age structure among rural teaching staff. Due to the huge attraction of cities that offer far greater development potential, young teachers tend to avoid employment in villages or can only serve a very short period there. Middle-aged rural teachers would go to any length to move to urban positions because of their overwhelming intention to have their children educated in urban schools. Only older rural teachers choose to stay because of their attachment to the school that they have served for years. At the same time, due to the outflow of younger teachers, some rural schools opt to re-employ a retired teacher, which further increases the proportion of older teachers in the teaching force. This issue is particularly severe in underdeveloped regions. Hao's 2023 investigation of teacher staffing at Xiadahe Village Central School in Liaoyang County, Liaoning Province, showed that there were 47 teachers aged 45 and older, representing 79.7% of the total number of 59, and only six younger teachers under the age of 45, accounting for 10.1% (10). In China, a sizeable portion of older teachers have difficulty adapting to advanced education ideas and teaching methods, such as the blended learning model that utilizes online resources in teaching, which reduces students' exposure to cutting-edge knowledge and impedes the improvement of compulsory education quality in rural areas.

In addition, rural areas may have an adequate supply of teachers for Chinese, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and English, which are generally treated as "major subjects," while schools there typically do not have sufficient teachers for "minor subjects" such as music, PE, and computing (11). Such teacher configuration is not helpful to rural compulsory education students who deserve more comprehensive development.

Inadequate Professional Development of Rural Teachers

Overly heavy workloads and a lack of in-service education resources substantially restrict rural teachers' professional development. Due to teaching staff shortages in rural schools, it has become a common occurrence that a rural teacher conducts in-

struction for various subjects and grades concurrently. Zhu's survey results revealed that, on average, each rural teacher worked 8.91 hours every day, teaching 2.65 subjects (12). In addition to class instruction, rural teachers need to engage in all sorts of day-to-day administration work as well as being involved in inspections, investigations, and educational research sponsored by all levels of educational authorities, which consumes considerable amounts of time. As a result, rural teachers' time investment in professional development is extremely limited. Furthermore, in-service education resources accessible to rural teachers cannot meet their needs for professional development. In order to improve the professional level of rural teachers, the central authorities have initiated a series of rural teacher-specialized training programs. Somehow, existing training programs do not suit their needs well, showing little relevance to their professional development (13). Basically, professional development resources available to rural teachers are limited to the school level. Nevertheless, the majority of rural schools do not have sufficient capability to address teacher in-service training in terms of expertise and financing (14).

As a result of the limited opportunity for professional development, rural teachers frequently have difficulty adapting to the revised curriculum program and course standards. Under the poor conditions for knowledge upgrading, they have difficulty promptly understanding and putting into practice the new education concepts and teaching methods proposed by the curriculum reform. They are more likely to continue with those education concepts and methods they have become accustomed to, which are often outdated. In addition, rural teachers typically have inadequate training in student management. A considerable portion of students that rural teachers deal with are left-behind children, who often have psychological issues during the compulsory education phase. This requires their teachers to help and guide them with relevant expertise, which is what the majority of rural teachers lack. In her survey of the professional development of rural teachers in Z County, Sichuan Province, in 2023, Wang found that among all types of in-service training rural teachers received, subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and educational theories were the three main components of teacher professional training, representing 45%, 36%, and 15% of the total amount of training, respectively, whereas training on student management only accounted for 5% (15).

Underlying Causes of Rural School Staffing Issues

Lack of External Support

Lower Level of Economic Development in Rural Areas

Despite the progressively rising living standards of Chinese rural residents in recent years as a result of the nation's rural revitalization strategy, the advancement of urbanization has produced large numbers of immigrants from rural to urban areas, causing issues such as the aging of the rural population and a drastic decrease in the rural population (16). The reduced labor force and a resident body mainly constituted by left-behind females and elderly people have significantly reduced the promis-

es of economic vitality in rural areas.

Historically, China has long been implementing a social system of urban vs. rural dual structure, which prioritized allocating resources to urban areas and led to substantial gaps not only in per capita income but also in basic public services between urban and rural areas (17). In education, resource distribution in terms of financial investment, school infrastructure, and teacher supply has been in favor of urban schools.

The economic imbalance is the fundamental factor in rural teachers' employment mobility patterns (18). There are significant disparities in teacher compensation between schools, between urban and rural areas, and between regions. Particularly, the urban vs. rural differences in teacher salaries, perks, and social welfare are the most important reason for the outflow of rural teachers.

Unsuccessful Policy Implementation

To develop balanced compulsory education is the primary goal of China's educational reform. For this purpose, the Chinese government has issued a wide range of policies, such as the Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of Teacher Education and Training in the New Era (19), Opinions on Augmenting Rural Teacher Supply in the New Era (20), and the Rural Teacher Support Program 2015-2020 (5). On the other hand, there is a lack of sound mechanisms for ensuring the implementation of these policies. Therefore, their effects are questionable. In addition, due to poor publicity of policies, especially those related to salaries, compensation, and professional development of rural teachers, many rural teachers are not clear about their rights and interests (21). Also, the execution of national education policies involves a variety of departments at multiple levels, resulting in low efficiency and effectiveness. The ineffective implementation of rural teacher support policies hinders teaching force development for rural compulsory education in ways described below.

- Policies on enhancing rural teachers' remuneration have not been properly executed. Despite the state's reiteration of the necessity of a pay rise for them, their monthly salaries remain markedly lower than the nation's average level. According to the data from 2018 from the China Education Statistical Yearbook and China Education Finance Statistical Yearbook 2021, the average monthly income of rural junior secondary school teachers (including village and township teachers) was roughly 10,000 CYN, and the average monthly income of primary school teachers was approximately 9,600 CYN, which were 77% and 79% of that of their urban counterparts, respectively (10). Salaries and perks for rural teachers not only directly affect their quality of life and their work dedication but are the main factor influencing their employment mobility.
- There are no supporting and implementation mechanisms in place for policies on teacher professional development that pertain to rural teachers' professional characteristics and development needs. Article seven of the Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that teachers have the right to participate in further education or other forms of in-service training (22). However, there exists a gap between the policies on teacher professional develop-

ment and their practical implementation (23). The most pronounced issues include: (i) The uneven distribution of training opportunities. Even though the central authorities have launched a number of training programs for teachers across the nation, it is up to local education departments to decide who can participate in them. Frequently, only those high-performing rural teachers have been offered the training opportunities. (ii) The irrelevance of training materials to actual teaching practices. Most teachers' training emphasizes theoretical knowledge over solutions to practical problems arising in teaching, resulting in poor training outcomes (24).

- The current professional title rating system is unfair to rural teachers. Teachers' salaries are directly related to their professional titles. Nonetheless, the existing professional title rating system is not helpful in stimulating rural teachers' dedication to their careers. According to current practice, the number of middle- and senior-rank professional titles that a school is granted depends on its level and type in the education system, and the distribution criteria are disadvantageous to rural schools for various reasons. Compared to urban schools, they are assigned much fewer middle- and senior-rank professional titles, showing grim promotion prospects for many of those talented rural teachers (25).

Immature Teaching Staff Management within Rural Schools

The present teacher evaluation framework is not beneficial to encouraging work enthusiasm in rural teachers. Most rural schools adopt the hierarchical management system prevalent in government organizations. Teachers' professional titles largely depend on their service lengths; the so-called performance-based salaries are not related to performance but instead to administration ranks. The evaluation mechanisms only serve as tools to measure the workloads teachers fulfill, but their roles in incentivizing teachers' engagement are overlooked (26).

Furthermore, the bulk of school-based training addresses general theoretical knowledge irrelevant to rural teachers' instructional practice. Most training providers hired by schools do not research the rural communities' circumstances before administering the training and fail to design training materials that pertain to rural teachers' actual needs. In addition, there is a lack of effective methods to assess the results of training. Teachers' training participation and outcomes cannot be properly monitored (27).

Low Confidence of Rural Teachers in the Teaching Profession

The majority of rural teachers have their professional pursuits, the fulfillment of which requires support from their work environment, including good work relationships, high-quality leadership, educational research-supportive conditions, and career advancement opportunities (28). Nevertheless, in actuality, rural teachers' development needs have not been appropriately met, resulting in a low professional identity in them. This is one of the main reasons for the low retention of rural teaching staff.

In the meantime, the changing rural society complicates

teachers' integration into rural life and compromises their confidence in their career prospects. Low recognition of the teaching profession among rural communities is undermining teachers' retention intentions. When suitable opportunities come, they will jump on them to leave the countryside and even forego the profession of teaching forever (29).

Recommendations on Improving Rural School Staffing

Strengthening Policy Support

Advancing the nation's rural revitalization strategy is of fundamental significance for teaching force building in rural areas. In February 2021, the Opinions of the State Council of China on Comprehensively Advancing Rural Revitalization and Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernization were released, providing policy underpinnings for addressing the "Three Key Issues in Rural Areas" and guidelines for improving work on rural issues in the future. It is emphasized in the paper that the resource supply for rural compulsory education should be continuously increased, and the integration of urban and rural education should be encouraged to enhance the operational conditions of rural schools (30). Economic growth is the bedrock of rural social advancement and educational development, promising higher retention of talented teachers.

The central government's policies on augmenting rural teachers' incomes should be implemented in more effective ways. The 2016 Response of the Ministry of Education to Recommendation No. 4529 of the Fourth Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress proposed that rural teachers should be allowed a compensation framework of "salary + perks + traffic subsidies" and a living-condition guarantee mechanism of "urban housing + interim dormitory" (31). The 2020's Opinions on Augmenting Rural Teacher Supply in the New Era, released by the Ministry of Education and other five departments, also emphasized guaranteeing the payment of salaries and perks for rural teachers. It reiterates that the average salary of rural teachers should be the same as or above that of local civil servants; that the performance-based salary system should adjust to give certain preferential treatment to teachers with rural small-scale schools, boarding schools, ethnic minority schools, and schools in remote and underdeveloped areas; that extra subsidies should be offered to rural teachers in extremely impoverished areas; and that rural teachers' welfare in terms of housing, medical care, and compensation should be progressively bolstered to enhance their sense of gain (20). Improving rural teachers' material well-being is crucial for the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers in rural areas.

Optimizing in-service Training for Rural Teachers

2020's Opinions on Augmenting Rural Teacher Supply in the

New Era highlighted the importance of rural teacher in-service training, suggesting creating multi-level training institutions specializing in rural teacher professional development and leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as AI and 5th Generation Communication to advance teacher education and training programs (20).

In terms of training contents, it is necessary to modify training programs according to the actual needs of the participants and the actual situations of rural education. Educational departments or institutions permitted to provide training to rural schools should conduct on-site investigations and research in rural areas before administering the training (32). As to training modes, the state's "Internet + Education" strategy can be introduced into the execution of rural teacher training. In the information age, investment in digital transformation in rural areas must be continuously increased to fully utilize the strengths of the Internet to support rural compulsory education. For rural teachers with limited opportunities to participate in in-person training due to their schools' remote location and scarce funding, web-based training forms such as MOOCs and microcourses are highly advisable, through which they can have adequate exposure to high-quality online demonstration courses (33). Regarding teacher training evaluation, training results should be assessed by their effects on participants' professional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, which enable effective monitoring of teachers' engagement in training programs and timely modification of training methods and materials (34).

Enhancing Social Recognition of Rural Teachers' Careers

Improving the professional identity of rural teachers is a critical endeavor for strengthening the teaching force in rural compulsory education. Rural teachers' dedication to educational careers is contingent on a social environment that supports their fulfillment of life purpose.

As per the 2018 Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of Teacher Education and Training in the New Era, a powerful teaching force is the precondition of national prosperity. A comprehensive reform of teacher management to improve the social status of teachers is necessitated to make teaching a desirable profession (19). Engaging rural teachers in social governance, education development, and school management is an effective way to enhance their sense of belonging to the local community, thus boosting their employment intentions in rural areas. To elevate the social status of rural teachers and increase their job happiness and pride, it is necessary for the community to build a teacher-respected and education-valued social culture by providing rural teachers with more accolades. Improving social recognition of the teaching profession will help rural areas successfully attract and retain qualified teachers and improve their compulsory education quality. ■

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