

Challenges of Rural Teachers' Development in Remote Areas of Western China

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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges of rural teachers' development in Western China. Rural teachers are the backbone of China's basic education as well as the key and future of rural basic education development. How to inject and retain rural teachers as well as stabilize the ranks of rural teachers is fundamental to improving the quality of rural basic education, including promoting rural revitalization. Via the investigation of rural schools in Western China, this paper discovered that there are still several challenges in the development of rural teachers, for instance, teacher structure deviation, low overall educational background, serious substitute teachers, few training times, simple training methods, poor training effect, and serious teacher loss. According to the interview results, the existing challenges among rural teachers are analyzed, and recommendations are given, which include obtaining a rational allocation of teacher resources, optimizing the teacher structure, strengthening teacher training, enhancing the overall quality of teachers, and improving the incentive system in detail.

Keywords: challenges, rural teacher, education, team construction, Western China

1. Introduction

China is a huge nation with a considerable rural population, constituting a significant portion of its total populace. The enhancement of rural teacher capabilities is a focal point in line with China's educational objectives. The progress of Western China's rural teachers is intricately connected to the present state as well as the caliber of rural teachers in that region, exerting a significant influence on the overall quality of primary education across the country. Advancing the development of primary education in rural Western China serves to enhance the quality of rural education as well as promote the modernization of primary education in the region.

Currently, China boasts a teaching workforce of 11.31 million teachers, with 2.9 million of them serving in rural areas, making up just 0.26% of the total. The progress of education modernization in China is closely intertwined with the advancement of rural education, which, in turn, hinges on the modernization of rural teachers. As of the conclusion of 2015, there were 10,851 regular primary as well as secondary schools in China, employing 610,000 full-time teachers, with rural teachers constituting 67.3% of this group (Department of Development Planning, Ministry of Education, PRC, 2016). The effectiveness of rural education in Western China is closely tied to the successful execution of the "rural revitalization strategy."

According to Li and Zhang (2018), rural teachers play a crucial role in the strength of rural education, making them central to enhancing its quality. The deficiency in rural compulsory education primarily stems from the limitations of small-scale schools in rural areas, while the solution to its progress hinges on the development of teachers in these schools. In 2015, the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020) emphasized the need to prioritize the establishment of rural teachers as well as position them strategically. It emphasized the importance of building a dedicated as well as high-quality teaching workforce firmly rooted in rural areas. Concurrently, as part of the country's strategic planning for revitalization, the concept of giving precedence to the development of rural education was introduced. This concept underscores the significance of elevating the status of rural education during the national revitalization process. Improving the quality of rural education is seen as the essential pathway to achieving the broader strategy of rural revitalization. Within this context, rural teachers, serving as the cornerstone of the rural education community, hold substantial practical importance for both rural education as well as the overall rural revitalization effort.

In the past few years, the government has released multiple policy papers concerning the enhancement of the teaching constitution. These policies aim to raise the competence and caliber of rural teachers as well as foster educational progress. However, as indicated by Wang (2018), the outcomes have fallen short of expectations. Consequently, to advance the growth of compulsory education in rural regions, it is imperative to prioritize the training as well as the development of teachers in smaller rural schools. The main goal of this research is to delve into the challenges of rural teachers' development in Western China and try to suggest solutions and practical approaches to this problem.

1.1 Literature Review

The advancement of rural educators plays a vital role in the prosperity of rural education. Over an extended period, rural education in China has faced challenges in attracting as well as keeping teachers and ensuring efficient teaching. Given this situation, certain local scholars have suggested the need to define clear policy objectives as well as institutional support while enhancing the dissemination of educational resources between rural and urban areas. This approach aims to stimulate the professional growth of rural teachers as well as enhance the overall standard of rural education (Zhao, 2019).

Some scholars also argue that providing training for rural teachers is a crucial supplementary approach to enhancing China's current efforts in rural teacher development (Ma, 2019). To enhance the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020)'s efficacy, it is essential to bolster its visibility, create a provincial-level salary security system for rural teachers, rigorously implement the supplementary and withdrawal procedures for these teachers, as well as refine the management system for rural teacher staffing, all while considering the policy's outcomes (Fu & Fan, 2018). In order to secure a stable rural teacher rank, the government can utilize policy instruments by prioritizing the motivational aspects of incentive measures, reinforcing compensation procedures for instructors facing shortages, as well as ensuring that teaching positions across different schools remain appealing. The government ought to enhance vital resources to tackle the persistent shortage of rural teachers, establish consistent procedures for teacher transfers, provide more opportunities for capacity development, elevate the professional competence of rural educators, as well as support them in gaining valuable professional expertise (Wang, 2018).

Teachers act as mentors in facilitating the wholesome growth of students. At the same time, they hold a crucial responsibility in molding the forthcoming cohort of socialist constructors as well as heirs through fostering comprehensive development in morals, intellect, physical fitness, aesthetics, including work ethic. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure the correct political orientation in nurturing teachers, as well as to advance moral education for teachers, enhance the teacher education system, improve teacher status, as well as bolster the ranks of rural teachers.

In recent years, scholars have conducted increasingly extensive research due to the growing focus of the state and government on rural teacher teams as well as rural revitalization efforts. Their research has revealed issues in the development of rural teachers, including inadequate compensation, excessive job stress, an imbalanced team composition, as well as a high rate of teacher turnover.

When rural teachers' earnings are contrasted to those in comparable sectors like civil service, it becomes evident that the majority of the salary increment they receive is mitigated by inflation, resulting in their salaries remaining below the industry's average wage. Furthermore, their earnings fall short of what civil servants make, while the wage gap between rural teaching and the national economy industry's average salary is growing wider (Jiang & Du, 2014). Between 1978 and 1999, the education sector had wages below the national average income. However, after 1999, the average salary in the education industry increased slightly

and surpassed the national standard wage, even though the difference was not substantial. In subsequent years, the education sector's average earnings lagged behind many other industries in the national economy, placing it in the lower middle-income bracket (Du, Liu & Du, 2013).

Rural schools pose significant challenges for educators, primarily due to their remote locations, making commuting difficult. Over 50% of teachers in rural areas are tasked with multiple teaching roles, with some even responsible for teaching up to six core subjects. Previous research indicates that many rural teachers may not possess the necessary expertise in psychology as well as pedagogy (Sun & Lin, 2014). It was discovered that rural primary schools in central as well as Western China have a notably high percentage of teachers aged 50 and above, while the presence of young teachers under 30 is quite limited (Fan, Zeng & Guo, 2013). In fact, it is common to find rural primary school teachers who are older than 55. Additionally, their research revealed a significant deficiency of teachers in subjects like English, Physical Education, as well as Art at the primary school level. Many of these subjects are taught on a part-time basis by teachers from different fields, and in some cases, these subjects are not offered at all in certain schools.

In other nations, rural teachers encounter challenges related to inadequate numbers as well as subpar quality, and there exists an imbalance in the development of compulsory education teachers between rural and urban areas (Fu, 2011). In the United States, rural teachers contend with issues, for instance, teacher shortages, a scarcity of highly qualified instructors, various teaching obstacles, incomplete teacher education systems, elevated teacher turnover rates, as well as significant setbacks. These difficulties impede the sustainable advancement of primary education in rural parts of the United States. Challenges like the shortage of educators continue to exist in Australia, particularly in remote as well as thinly populated rural regions. Currently, rural schools primarily employ young and inexperienced teachers, leading to a notably high teacher turnover rate in these areas (Trinidad et al., 2012). Certain American academics have highlighted that, aside from inadequate salaries, substandard housing conditions, as well as a lack of access to shopping and entertainment amenities serve as significant factors contributing to teachers' attrition in certain rural schools (Monk, 2007).

1.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

As per Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the needs of rural educators encompass the following dimensions: Firstly, within the realm of education and teaching, teachers aspire to receive fair compensation as well as a favorable work environment, addressing their physiological requirements. Secondly, teachers seek job stability, fulfilling their safety needs as educators. Thirdly, teachers have a desire to assimilate into the school community as well as cultivate harmonious relationships with fellow teachers and students, reflecting their social needs as rural teachers. Fourth, teachers aim to achieve students' satisfaction as well as gain recognition and approval from the school, essentially fulfilling their desire for respect. Fifth, certain rural teachers aspire to disseminate knowledge, hoping to experience the joy and fulfillment that comes from imparting knowledge and skills, as well as satisfying their need for self-fulfillment. In Ye's (2021) account, it was explained that physiological as well as

safety needs can be classified as basic necessities associated with survival. In contrast, social and esteem needs are categorized as belonging requirements. Self-actualization needs to occupy the topmost tier in the hierarchy of needs. Figure 1 illustrates a comparison between Maslow's original hierarchy as well as the hierarchy proposed by Maslow's teacher.

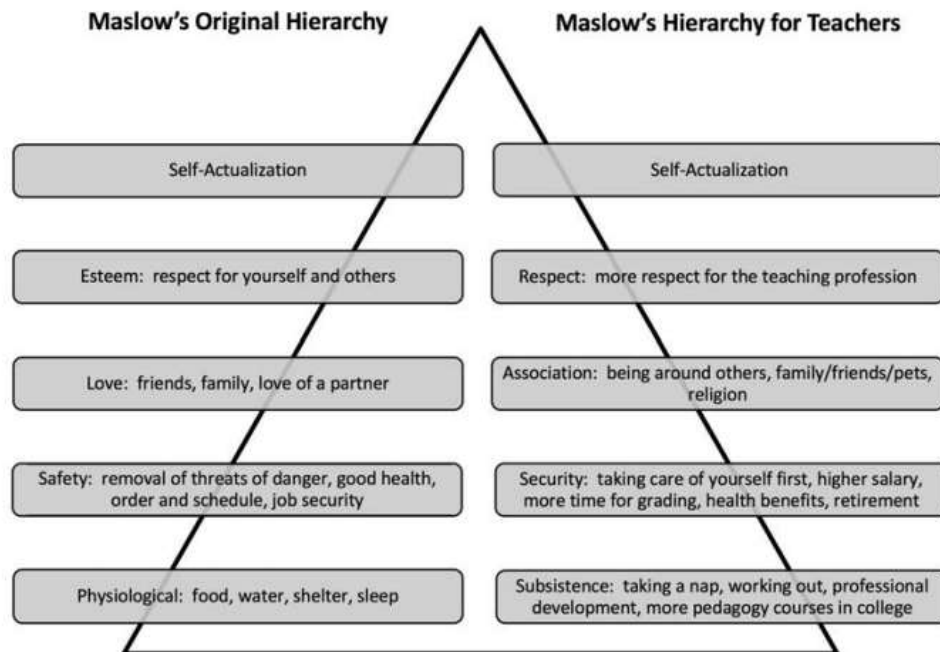


Figure 1. Maslow's Original Hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) compared to Maslow's Hierarchy for Teachers (Fisher & Royster, 2016)

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research purpose is to delve into the challenges of rural teachers in Western China. A qualitative research method is applied in this study. There are various data collection methods in qualitative research, which include interviews (groups or individuals), text or visual analysis (from videos or books), as well as observation (Gill et al., 2008). In this research, semi-structured interviews were used in order to gather the data from the respondents.

2.2 Sample Study and Data Collection Procedure

The chosen sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, which is suitable when the scholar chooses samples based on their understanding of the population, its characteristics, factors, as well as the study's objectives. The respondents were five in-service teachers and two leaders who work in a rural school. Respondents were notified about the upcoming interviews, and then interview sessions were arranged based on the availability of teachers from the respective schools. Given transportation as well as pandemic-related precautions, the interviews will take place online via platforms like WeChat, Tencent Meeting, or Zoom, with each interview expected to be limited to a maximum duration of one hour.

3. Results

3.1 Respondents' Demographic Profiles

Table 1 depicts the summary of respondents' demographic profiles. Of the total of seven respondents who were involved in the interview, 28.6 percent (2 out of 7 respondents) are male, and 71.4 percent (5 out of 7 respondents) are female. All participants are Chinese. For marital status, 42.8 percent are unmarried, while 57.2 percent are married. 28.6 percent (2 out of 7 respondents) have less than three years of teaching experience. The rest of the respondents have been teaching for more than three years.

Table 1. Summary of the Demographic Profiles Respondents

Characteristics	Total participants (n=7)
Gender	
Male	2
Female	5
Marital Status	
Unmarried	3
Married	4
Teaching Time	
< 3 Years	2
3-5 Years	4
>5 Years	1

3.2 Teacher Structure Flaws

According to the interview, the inadequate composition of rural primary school teachers in Western China can be primarily observed in several areas. To begin with, when considering their educational backgrounds, there is a notable absence of full-time teachers with a substantial initial educational foundation. Predominantly, the educational qualifications of rural primary school teachers in Western China are limited to bachelor's degrees and junior college degrees, accounting for approximately 92-93 percent of the workforce. Therefore, rural primary schools in Western China still require the recruitment of a specific number of teachers who possess an initial education level of a full-time bachelor's degree or even a

postgraduate degree. Additionally, when considering the age distribution, there is a prevalent trend of an aging population. This is largely due to various factors such as economic incentives, working and living conditions, geographical constraints, as well as other circumstances that make it challenging for new teachers to fulfill the educational requirements in Western China's rural primary schools. In this context, the middle-aged, including senior teachers, particularly those with extensive experience, have played a crucial role as the mainstay of the teaching staff in rural primary schools in Western China for an extended period. The shortage of young teachers, as well as the imbalanced age distribution among educators, are becoming more noticeable. Nearly all the currently employed teachers in rural areas concur that addressing the educational qualifications, scarcity of teachers, as well as age-related issues are critical challenges that must be tackled to improve the situation of rural teachers in Western China.

The majority of our school's teachers hold bachelor's degrees, while a small portion are junior college teachers, and there is a scarcity of teachers possessing master's degrees. In contrast to urban schools, there is a pressing requirement to bring in a substantial number of teachers who have either bachelors or master's degrees. [Teacher B]

In relation to our school, a significant issue lies in the shortage of teachers. Full-time teachers not only instruct undergraduate courses but also handle various subjects, including counseling students, among other responsibilities. This places a considerable workload on some instructors. Furthermore, there is a shortage of highly qualified teachers, with the majority having undergraduate qualifications. Many college graduates are hesitant to work in rural areas due to geographical and environmental factors. [Teacher C]

The composition of our school's teachers includes full-time teachers, substitute teachers, specialized post teachers, volunteer teachers, rotating teachers, as well as other elements. The teacher structure experiences instability because of the limited duration of teaching by volunteer teachers as well as substitute teachers. [Teacher D]

3.3 Teacher Turnover

Rural regions often present challenges in terms of living conditions as well as transportation, leading some young educators to struggle with adapting to rural life and choosing to teach in urban areas. In some cases, teachers decide to relocate to cities to access improved educational resources for the benefit of future generations. This disparity in living standards and conditions between rural as well as urban areas leads to weaker educational facilities and relatively lower treatment for rural teachers. Consequently, many young, innovative teachers with impressive teaching achievements end up moving to urban areas with more favorable teaching environments, resulting in a notable shortage of young teachers in rural schools.

For example, via the interview, Teacher A thinks:

Work pressure is big, while rural transportation is inconvenient, which leads to a village teacher's life boring. The teachers cannot take time out of the country to get new knowledge and have a more fashionable lifestyle. This makes young teachers run away to

the cities. [Teacher A]

It can be concluded from the interview that the conflict between "want to leave the countryside" and "can't leave the countryside" results in a large number of rural teachers' migration.

3.4 Teacher Training

Teacher training takes on various forms and categories, with primary modalities including ongoing professional development for teachers, preparation of new teachers, coordinated arrangements for advanced training, and more. These training programs can occur within the local region, overseen by the Department of Education, or they may take place outside the province, organized at the national level. The selection of specific teacher training formats is contingent upon the specific circumstances and requirements of individual schools. However, there remain two significant issues within teacher training. Firstly, the training outcomes are not readily discernible, often lacking relevance and primarily being a matter of going through the motions. Secondly, the funding allocated for training falls short. This is due to training fees being primarily determined by the financial capabilities of individual schools. Institutions with limited resources cannot cover the training costs for their teachers, leaving teachers to bear most, if not all, of the expenses themselves. This situation severely dampens teachers' enthusiasm for training while perpetuating a negative cycle. The flaws within the teacher training system result in a diminished passion among educators for both teaching as well as their own professional growth. Among the issues encountered in the training process are the absence of specialized subject knowledge training, an excess of theoretical content, as well as a shortage of practical and professional expertise.

According to Teacher G:

Our school offers limited training opportunities, but I believe that if teachers can frequently participate in training sessions, it would greatly benefit us by enhancing our existing knowledge, improving our skills, as well as expanding our perspectives. [Teacher G]

There are certain issues present, for example, the training primarily emphasizing specialized knowledge as well as theoretical aspects of the discipline, with limited emphasis on practical knowledge. The training material is overly broad, lacking a clear focus, which makes it challenging for us to grasp. Additionally, there is some repetition in the training content, and it seems that the training's effectiveness is somewhat lacking. [Teacher G]

Teacher F concurred:

Merely involving rural teachers in training as well as related activities as a mere formality will not support their professional growth or advancement. To establish an effective environment for the professional development of rural teachers, the emphasis should be placed on the regularity including excellence of teacher training. [Teacher F]

4. Recommendations for Teacher Practice

First of all, it is recommended to enhance the subject structure concerning Western China rural primary school teachers. A flexible formulation and adjustment of the Western rural teacher staffing system maximizes the integration of teacher resources, ensures the professionalism of subject teaching and the convenience of teacher work, and ensures the subject structure rationality of Western rural areas primary school teachers. Optimizing the age structure with regard to Western China rural primary school teachers is also one suggestion in order to face the challenge. Preferential policies need to be formulated to encourage outstanding young and middle-aged urban teachers to volunteer in rural areas in Western China. The organic combination of appropriate retirement of old rural teachers in Western China, as well as the continued introduction of excellent young teachers, will enhance the vitality and motivation of rural schools in Western China, including transforming the structural proportion of young and middle-aged teachers and old teachers.

Secondly, it is recommended to increase investment in education and improve the treatment of teachers. One could argue that teachers represent a form of human capital, and like other forms of capital, they seek to maximize their returns. To retain and attract exceptional educators in rural schools, it is imperative to increase teacher salaries as well as implement diverse incentive programs. This is the only way to genuinely entice top-notch educators to work in rural areas and keep them there. The government should enhance its investment in rural primary education as well as actively enhance the working conditions, including living standards for teachers in these regions. Education departments at the county level should work towards improving the well-being of teachers in rural areas. Furthermore, schools should make continuous efforts to secure funding, boost revenue, as well as cut costs. They should also actively incorporate new teaching equipment, enhance learning, including working conditions in rural schools, as well as ensure that necessary hardware support is available for these schools. In addition, rural teachers working under difficult conditions should be given more financial compensation to improve their teaching enthusiasm so as to reduce the dismissal rate of rural teachers.

Thirdly, teacher training needs to be strengthened. It was found in the interview that due to the lack of funds in rural areas, many teachers in Western rural areas lack chances to continue learning, and a number of the training levels are poor. In contrast, the training effect is difficult or not ideal to accept. Therefore, strengthening the training of rural teachers, providing them with opportunities to pursue study as well as helping them improve their teaching skills is an important guarantee for the sustainable development of rural teachers. Increasing the funding for teacher training and education in rural regions will ensure adequate funding for teacher training in rural regions and increase per capita funding for teacher training. This will enhance educational opportunities for teachers in rural areas as well as create well-structured and evidence-based training programs. Meanwhile, approximately 46% of rural teachers perceive the major issues in current training to be one-sided instruction, rigid training materials, limited teaching techniques, as well as unsatisfactory training outcomes. When training rural educators, it is crucial to focus on tailoring the training to their specific needs as well as ensuring its effectiveness. This involves integrating rural teaching

experiences as well as providing comprehensive teacher development. Simultaneously, diversifying training methods will open up more avenues for learning, motivating rural teachers to engage with external information sources, expand their perspectives, as well as enhance their cultural knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Enhancing the caliber of educators and forming a proficient team of high-quality teachers is a crucial concern within academia. This paper delves into the challenges faced by rural teachers within the context of rural revitalization, focusing on the perspective of these educators, as well as discussing potential solutions. This study takes the rural areas of Western China as an instance to delve into the challenges occurring in the current development of rural teachers in Western China. Via interviews and findings, it is discovered that there are still several challenges in the development of rural teachers in Western China.

One could argue that teaching is a wonderful profession, marked by a heartfelt commitment to the field, while it shines as one of the most remarkable careers in existence. Teachers serve as guiding figures, fostering societal advancement. They bear the weight of national growth on their shoulders, channeling the benefits of societal progress. Teachers form the bedrock of education, and without exceptional educators, achieving positive educational outcomes becomes an uphill task. Teachers can truly become respected professionals as well as find fulfillment by continuously enhancing their well-being and providing them with a greater sense of accomplishment, happiness, and stability. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance the situation for rural teachers, as this will play a significant role in advancing the progress of rural education.

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