

The Dilemma and Breakthrough of Professional Development for Teachers in Rural Small-scale Schools from the Perspective of Field Theory

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ABSTRACT

Rural education development serves as an intrinsic driving force for rural revitalization, with the professional development of teachers in small rural schools being a critical component of this advancement. Currently, the professional growth of these educators faces significant challenges, including a lack of professional and cultural identity, insufficient specialized knowledge and skills, and inadequate training support. This study, grounded in Bourdieu's field theory, analyzes factors influencing professional development through three dimensions: field rules, teacher habitus, and capital divides. It proposes improvement strategies: reshaping the educational field, refining teacher habitus, and enriching developmental capital. Ultimately, these approaches aim to overcome challenges and achieve professional growth.

KEYWORDS

Rural small-scale school teachers; Professional development; Field theory

1 Introduction

Educational revitalization serves as the primary driving force for rural revitalization. Only by strengthening rural education can we effectively support rural revitalization. A high-quality teaching force in rural small-scale schools is crucial for enhancing educational quality. In recent years, the Party and the state have formulated and implemented a series of policies focused on building the teaching force in rural small-scale schools, such as the Support Plan for Teachers in Rural Small-Scale Schools (2015-2020) Opinions on Strengthening the Development of the Teacher Workforce in Rural Small-Scale Schools in the New Era, Targeted Training Program for Outstanding Teachers in Underdeveloped Central and Western Regions, Notice on Implementing the Collaborative Quality Improvement Plan for Teacher Education, and the New Era Basic Education Teacher Strengthening Program. Investment and support for this workforce have steadily increased. However, despite substantial talent infusion into rural small-scale schools, China's rural education still grapples with the dual challenges of "retaining teachers" and "improving teaching quality"^[1]. Facilitating teachers' continuous professional growth across career stages to enhance educational quality represents both a significant theoretical research topic and a complex practical challenge. Bourdieu's field theory, with its relational paradigm and analytical tools—field, capital, and habitus—offers a unique perspective for revealing the underlying structures and operational logic of social phenomena. This theory's deep focus on power relations within fields, forms of capital, and the mechanisms of habitus formation provides a powerful theoretical lens for examining professional development issues among teachers in rural small-scale schools. Grounded in the theoretical framework of educational sociology, this study focuses on the structural dilemmas in the professional development of teachers in rural small-scale schools. It systematically analyzes how the disciplinary forces of the field shape teachers' practical spaces, how the implicit dominance of habitus influences professional behavioral choices, and how the uneven distribution of capital constrains teachers' professional development. Furthermore, it explores how to effectively navigate the relationship among the field, teacher habitus, and teacher capital to break through these dilemmas.

2 The Practical Dilemmas of Professional Development for Teachers in Rural Small-Scale Schools

2.1 Lack of Professional Identity and Rural Cultural Affiliation

Many teachers in rural small-scale schools lack a firm commitment to teaching in rural areas and a sense of belonging to the local community. Research indicates that even highly educated and exceptionally skilled rural teachers—particularly young, well-educated educators with outstanding teaching abilities—face a dual crisis of professional identity and cultural belonging within the rural educational context. This crisis of identity hinders their capacity for sustained professional growth. At its root, this phenomenon stems not only from economic constraints but also from deep connections to the socio-cultural ecosystem and cognitive biases within the teaching community itself. First, the urban-centric orientation of rural education has led to widespread perceptions of rural education as backward and inferior, and rural teachers as subpar educators. In this environment of negation, the professional competence of novice rural teachers struggles to gain respect and trust, gradually eroding their enthusiasm and confidence for professional growth. Second,

the imbalance in urban-rural educational development fosters an urban-centric cultural value orientation, weakening rural teachers' sense of identity, confidence, and emotional connection to their local culture. This ultimately leads to the erosion of local cultural heritage and the depletion of rural sentiment.

2.2 Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Competence

Professional knowledge constitutes a vital component of teacher professional development, encompassing subject-specific knowledge, cultural literacy, and pedagogical methods. Professional competence refers to the psychological traits ensuring effective teaching implementation—both a prerequisite for knowledge transmission and a factor influencing knowledge acquisition and application. Knowledge and competence are mutually reinforcing, jointly forming the foundation of teacher professionalism^[2]. Teachers in small rural schools face dual challenges in professional knowledge and competence. On one hand, regarding knowledge reserves, the knowledge structure of teachers in rural small-scale schools centers on subject-specific content and practical operational experience, with much of this knowledge exhibiting intuitive cognitive characteristics. Due to the lack of systematic integration within theoretical frameworks and the absence of deep refinement through rational thinking, this group struggles to grasp the underlying essential patterns behind educational phenomena. Consequently, their teaching practices remain confined to superficial levels, failing to develop a profound understanding of educational principles. On the other hand, teachers in rural small-scale schools exhibit significant deficiencies in explicit teaching competencies. For instance, in teaching methods, some teachers remain overly reliant on lecture-based approaches, with entire lessons sometimes devolving into a "one-man show" where the teacher lectures uninterrupted while students passively listen. Teachers in rural small-scale schools face a dual developmental dilemma: in teaching methodology, some remain overly reliant on traditional lecture formats, with ineffective classroom interaction mechanisms—sometimes resulting in teachers completely dominating the process while students passively absorb knowledge. This one-way transmission model severely hampers teaching effectiveness. Simultaneously, in terms of educational technology integration, some teachers neither master the operational standards of modern teaching equipment nor possess the intrinsic motivation to proactively learn digital teaching methods. This disconnect between their technological literacy and the demands of educational modernization directly impedes the effective application of digital teaching resources in educational settings^[3].

2.3 Insufficient Training Support

Compared to urban and township schools, rural communities still lag significantly in educational infrastructure development and resource allocation. Small-scale rural schools continue to face substantial challenges regarding digitalization and access to high-quality teaching resources. This situation creates multiple obstacles for rural communities and schools in supporting the professional development of teachers in small-scale rural schools, making it difficult to provide substantive assistance effectively. Against this backdrop, rural small-scale school teachers' access to professional development resources and the establishment of development platforms have become highly dependent on external provision. Although policies mandate resource allocation and platform support for rural schools, constraints such as remote locations, time limitations, and high economic costs make it difficult for these teachers to flexibly and conveniently access external professional development resources or participate in timely exchange and showcase activities on development platforms.

3 Formation Mechanism of Professional Development Challenges for Teachers in Rural Small-Scale Schools from a Field Theory Perspective

3.1 Distorted Field Institutional Rules

Institutional orientation plays a guiding role in teacher professional development. From an institutional economics perspective, "institutions" are indispensable endogenous resources for social and economic development. Within the educational practice field, educational institutions form the foundation for all activities. Therefore, exploring the challenges of teacher professional development necessitates first examining the institutional environment in which it occurs.

Regarding the teacher evaluation system, as a key component within the school education system and educational practice, it should serve as a vital mechanism for promoting teacher professional growth, enhancing overall educational quality, and supporting educational development. However, the current teacher evaluation system remains a significant bottleneck in educational advancement. Under a one-dimensional student evaluation framework, existing teacher assessment systems disproportionately emphasize measuring rural teachers' instructional performance while neglecting

the cultivation and enhancement of their intrinsic professional competencies. For instance, some schools evaluate teacher performance based on metrics like teaching hours, student grades in their classes, and honors received. This management approach disconnects the core essence of professional development from actual practice, leading teachers to adopt increasingly utilitarian, short-sighted, and fragmented approaches in setting goals and taking action during their professional growth.

Now consider the teacher training system. This system is a critical component for advancing the high-quality development of China's teaching workforce. Currently, teacher training content exhibits a pronounced "urban bias," resulting in training designs that insufficiently address the unique developmental needs of teachers in small rural schools. Training programs fail to adequately consider the realities of rural educational settings and do not effectively integrate teachers' individual development needs with training content. Furthermore, the assessment and evaluation system for teacher training is inadequate. Research indicates that evaluations of rural teacher training are often limited to attendance and assignment grades, with the sole goal being the acquisition of a completion certificate. This formalistic, summative approach lacks continuity, consistency, and systematicity^[4]. Following training activities, there is a lack of credible third-party institutions or dedicated entities responsible for conducting systematic evaluations and impact assessments. This absence of an evaluation mechanism directly leads to training processes falling into the trap of formality, manifesting in prominent issues such as disconnect between training content and practical needs, and difficulties in translating training outcomes into tangible improvements in teaching capabilities. Consequently, it fails to create effective incentives for promoting teachers' continuous professional development. Compared to urban teachers, rural educators inherently face structural shortages in accessible professional development resources. Against this backdrop, if education authorities fail to provide rural teachers with educational support genuinely aligned with their practical needs, their professional capital will remain stagnant and unable to evolve.

3.2 Teachers' Habitual Tendency Toward Self-Interest

Despite national efforts to revitalize rural education and promote integrated urban-rural educational development, persistent regional educational disparities remain unresolved due to longstanding urban-rural dual structures. Amid accelerating marketization, teachers—like other workers—face practical demands for economic gain and career advancement. The innate human tendency to pursue benefits and avoid harm has allowed utilitarian thinking to permeate societal attitudes. As a knowledge-based group within the educational sphere, teachers find it difficult to entirely escape the latent influence of these societal attitudes. For rural teachers who have experienced urbanization, small-scale rural schools may be viewed merely as stepping stones for career advancement, with little intention to establish long-term roots there. Compounded by the harsh realities of these schools—including sparse enrollment, heavy teaching and administrative burdens, low economic compensation and social status, and scarce resources—rural teachers are driven to seek escape. As urbanization accelerates and rural hollowing-out intensifies, some teachers' emotional ties to the countryside gradually weaken, undermining their professional identity and sense of belonging.

3.3 Imbalanced Capital Allocation

3.3.1 Economic Capital

According to Bourdieu's field theory, economic capital refers to material resources directly convertible into monetary value. For teachers in rural small-scale schools, the weakness of economic capital is a key factor constraining their professional development. Teachers with less experience working in economically underdeveloped regions face disadvantages in economic capital. They lack material support in professional development competition within the school field and face economic pressures in competing for survival resources in the social field, often struggling to cover basic living costs. Caught between resource scarcity and survival challenges, their professional development paths often become unattainable aspirations.

3.3.2 Cultural Capital

In Bourdieu's theory, culture is viewed as a form of capital that can be invested to yield returns. For teachers, cultural capital manifests as cultural tastes, practices, and skills that confer competitive advantages, embodying their cultural strength. In the real school environment, the cultural capital of teachers in small rural schools serves as a crucial "entry ticket," yet its monetary value remains relatively limited and lacks effective avenues for appreciation. According to labor market segmentation theory, education serves as a crucial mechanism for labor allocation, typically directing higher-educated individuals toward primary markets. Due to their relatively weaker cultural capital, teachers in rural small-scale schools are often assigned to remote areas through selection mechanisms. Urban and rural teachers face disparate starting points from the outset of their careers, with further divergence in supportive resources: urban teachers enjoy

superior platforms, more opportunities, and richer resources, while rural teachers—even when granted training opportunities under policy support—encounter issues like limited quotas and content mismatched with their needs. Urbanization-oriented training models exacerbate the gap in cultural capital accumulation between urban and rural teachers, perpetuating rural educators' disadvantaged developmental position.

3.3.3 Social Capital

Social capital refers to interpersonal support and resources individuals acquire through social networks. For rural teachers, social capital primarily encompasses social trust and relational networks. It serves as a crucial enabler for professional growth and career advancement. From the perspective of social trust, this manifests as recognition, respect, understanding, and support. The current societal lack of trust in rural teachers is directly reflected in the generally low levels of recognition, respect, understanding, and support they receive. Compared to urban teachers, rural educators are more susceptible to public and parental disdain. Parents often attribute students' inadequate knowledge and poor academic performance to teachers' insufficient teaching abilities. They also hold the preconceived notion that urban teachers are inherently more professional than their rural counterparts, believing that only those lacking ability or quality would choose to teach in small rural schools. Rural teachers experience differential treatment in social interactions, leading to psychological dissonance that erodes their sense of individual worth and professional identity. From a relational network perspective, individuals are embedded within specific social networks, and rural teachers' professional development is rooted in the concrete context of the village. As a familiar society, the village often positions teachers as "outsiders" due to their lack of kinship or geographical ties, making it difficult to establish organic, vital connections with the rural community. This alienation traps rural teachers in a state of physical presence but emotional detachment, ultimately weakening their sense of belonging to the local community.

4 Resolving the Professional Development Dilemma of Teachers in Rural Small-Scale Schools from a Field Theory Perspective

The professional development of teachers in small rural schools is constrained by the combined influence of educational settings, professional practices, and development resources. Therefore, to overcome the practical challenges faced in the professional growth of these educators, it is essential to reshape educational environments, enhance professional practices, and strengthen development resources.

4.1 Redesigning the Educational Context

4.1.1 Establish a supportive evaluation environment to elevate teachers' central role

At the macro level, educational evaluation concepts must be reshaped to return to the original principle of "teacher-centeredness" focusing on teachers' professional growth and well-being while establishing a developmental evaluation system. At the meso level, schools should cultivate a supportive evaluation culture, integrating formative, value-added, and third-party assessments. Principals must effectively utilize evaluation outcomes to guide teachers in rational attribution, shifting management toward professional leadership. At the micro level, teachers should actively engage in evaluations, strengthening self-reflection and collaborative awareness, transforming evaluations into processes for accumulating cultural capital. Through the synergy of external support and teacher-driven development, sustained momentum for professional growth is provided.

4.1.2 Breaking Down Barriers to Build Urban-Rural Teacher Professional Development Communities

By establishing urban-rural teacher communities that guide professional growth, we aim to stimulate teachers' intrinsic motivation, transforming the professional development of rural small-scale school teachers from "working alone" to "collaborative development"^[5]. Leveraging network information technology, we should build integrated urban-rural learning community platforms combining learning, practice, collaboration, and reflection functions, encouraging voluntary participation by schools and teachers. Leverage online spaces to share learning resources and establish information-sharing groups for urban-rural teacher professional development. This enables rural teachers to engage in dialogue and interaction with outstanding urban educators, learning from their knowledge and experience to achieve professional development goals.

4.1.3 Grounded in Local Context: Tailored Training Approaches

Building a high-quality rural teaching force and advancing high-quality rural education hinges on implementing targeted training. For training teachers in small rural schools: First, clarify training objectives. Conduct specialized research before launching training to fully understand the actual needs of individual teachers, the teaching team, and the school level. Based on this, organize multiple rounds of deliberation and discussion to organically integrate the training demands of all three parties, ensuring the training is both forward-looking and precisely aligned with practical needs. Second, differentiated training content must be provided. Teachers in rural small-scale schools exhibit inherent differences due to their distinct institutional contexts, necessitating customized training programs. For instance, training for teachers at township central schools could focus on classroom teaching model reform, multimedia instruction, and school-based curriculum development, while training for teachers at teaching points should emphasize comprehensive subject teaching, multi-grade teaching, care for left-behind children, and modern distance learning ^[6]. Third, diversify training models. Rural small-scale school teachers commonly face heavy teaching workloads, limited discretionary time, and inconvenience in traveling to urban areas for centralized training. Training organizers must fully account for these factors. Reasonably plan training periods, flexibly select appropriate formats, and comprehensively adopt diverse models such as school-based autonomous training, external learning assignments, off-site field observations, cross-school collaborative teaching research, and blended online-offline instruction. This approach will steadily advance teacher training in rural small-scale schools toward comprehensiveness, localization, and scientific rigor. Finally, refine the teacher training evaluation system by integrating process-based and summative assessments. Avoid evaluating training effectiveness solely based on attendance rates, task completion, participation frequency, or written test scores. Instead, focus on positive changes in trainees' knowledge growth, emotional engagement, skill internalization, learning beliefs, motivation, study habits, enthusiasm, and overall learning experience. Simultaneously, introduce independent third-party institutions or professional organizations to establish a multi-dimensional evaluation system involving education administrative departments, training institutions, participating teachers, student groups, and parent representatives. Employ a combination of quantitative metrics and qualitative assessments to conduct dynamic, full-process evaluations of training goal attainment, teacher competency enhancement, and the translation of training into teaching practice.

4.2 Improving Teacher Habits

To address profit-driven teaching habits, educators must reflect on their educational beliefs and practices. A teacher's beliefs serve as the spiritual foundation of their professional life, the creed of their vocation, a core component of teacher culture, an implicit guide for behavior, and the intrinsic driving force for professional growth ^[7]. The primary task for teachers to break through developmental bottlenecks is deep reflection on educational beliefs: examining whether they genuinely understand and embrace education's social value, whether they engage in educational practice with sincerity, and whether they possess the resolute will to overcome challenges and the self-awareness for continuous growth. Teachers should critically examine existing beliefs, proactively discard irrational assumptions, and reconstruct new belief systems through reflective practice. This iterative process enables professional growth and self-improvement. Amid the current wave of high-quality educational development, teachers' professional growth increasingly emphasizes critical constructive abilities. The deep-seated challenges faced by teachers in small rural schools stem from the interplay of institutional structures, entrenched mindsets, and habitual behaviors, with ideological constraints being the most critical factor. To break through these developmental bottlenecks, educators must employ a spirit of rational critique to deconstruct existing cognitive frameworks. Through dialectical synthesis in professional practice, they should develop innovative strategies tailored to the realities of rural education, achieving a leap from replicating experience to generating wisdom.

4.3 Cultivating Development Capital

While external conditions remain largely unchangeable, teachers can accumulate professional development capital through persistent effort and continuous advancement—particularly within rural education, where small-scale schools and their educators hold significant potential for impact. First, teachers in small rural schools must fully integrate into professional development cycles by actively participating in training programs, engaging deeply in thematic workshops, and enthusiastically enrolling in subject-specific teaching competitions as catalysts for personal growth. At the school level, regular democratic teacher evaluation mechanisms should be implemented to showcase and recognize the teaching achievements of small rural school educators. This approach motivates teachers to enhance their instructional capabilities while promoting multidimensional balance in the accumulation of cultural capital among teaching staff. Second, to ensure evaluation fairness and transparency, schools should establish robust professional title review systems. They should design diversified compensation and benefit packages tailored to the professional growth of rural small-scale

school teachers, including but not limited to competition bonuses, position-based subsidies, and comprehensive welfare benefits. This approach broadens pathways for accumulating economic capital, enhancing the profession's attractiveness and stability. Teachers in rural small-scale schools should maintain a mindset of self-development, continuously focusing on and promoting the sustained growth of their personal professional capital. Finally, upon reaching the stable phase of professional development, establishing master teacher studios grounded in educational prestige becomes crucial. Through inter-school exchanges and visits among master teachers, this accelerates the circulation and appreciation of social capital among rural small-scale school teachers^[8]. This process not only elevates their social reputation but also facilitates a profound transformation from personal achievements into widely recognized social capital.

5 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the comprehensive advancement of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, strengthening the rural teaching workforce has become a core driver for promoting high-quality rural education development. Enhancing teachers' professional competence is key to overcoming the bottlenecks in rural education. However, the professional development of teachers in rural small-scale schools currently faces multiple practical challenges, including a lack of professional and local cultural identity, insufficient professional knowledge and skills, and inadequate training support, reveals that the professional development of teachers in small rural schools is constrained by multiple factors: field rules, teacher habits, and capital. Applying this theory to reconstruct development pathways helps break through traditional thinking patterns and provides contextualized, systematic solutions for empowering teacher professionalism.

Funding

This paper presents the research results of Innovation Project of Guangxi Graduate Education "Research on the Development Model of Small-scale Rural Schools from a Symbiotic Perspective" (NO: XYCS2025076)

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