

The Construction of a Dual Mechanism for Cultivating the Spirit of Rural Elites Among Public-Funded Teacher Trainees

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of China's rural revitalization strategy and the national initiative to build an education powerhouse, public-funded teacher trainees constitute the core force in developing rural teaching teams. Cultivating their spirit of rural elites is thus of paramount importance. Grounded in identity theory and relational sociology, this study constructs a dual cultivation mechanism for fostering the spirit of rural elites among these trainees. The "Pre-Service and Post-Service Integrated Mechanism" emphasizes holistic development throughout the career lifecycle. During the pre-service phase, strategies such as redefining talent development objectives, optimizing curriculum systems, and implementing contextualized teaching strengthen trainees' understanding of the spirit of rural elites. In the post-service phase, targeted professional development, diverse platform building, and cultural cultivation foster a deeper embodiment and practice of this spirit. Information sharing and resource integration ensure seamless continuity between pre-service cultivation and post-service implementation. The "Individual-Organization Synergy Mechanism" underscores bidirectional empowerment. At the individual level, mechanisms focus on awakening self-awareness, internalizing values, and cultivating behaviors to stimulate intrinsic motivation for identifying with the spirit of rural elites. At the organizational level, universities, governments, and society collaboratively create a supportive ecosystem for growth. Together, these mechanisms form a symbiotic network where "organizational support empowers individual practice, while individual actions reciprocally enrich organizational development." Through sustained cultivation over time and dynamic interaction between subjects and their environment in space, this dual mechanism provides a systematic solution for nurturing public-funded teacher trainees who are deeply rooted in local communities and capable of leading rural educational revitalization. This framework offers both theoretical innovation and practical guidance for addressing the persistent challenges of rural teachers being "unwilling to relocate to rural areas, unable to remain long-term, and struggling to teach effectively."

Keywords: public-funded teacher trainees, spirit of rural elites, identity theory, relational sociology

1. Introduction

At the pivotal historical juncture where rural revitalization intersects with the national strategy to build an education powerhouse, enhancing the quality and efficiency of rural education is crucial for consolidating the nation's foundation and ensuring future prosperity. The policy of public-funded teacher training programs serves as a vital institutional arrangement for precisely supplementing rural teaching staff and elevating educational standards. Its core value lies not only in supplying qualified teachers to rural schools but also in cultivating a professional team imbued with both educational passion and local sentiment, thereby reshaping the rural educational ecology and spearheading cultural revitalization in villages (Ren & Chen, 2020). Against this backdrop, the "spirit of rural elites" — a value concept integrating traditional rural virtues such as social responsibility, moral demonstration, and attachment to hometowns with modern intellectuals' traits of public service and cultural leadership—has become a central component of the spiritual lineage expected of

public-funded teacher trainees. This ethos demands that these trainees transcend their singular role as educators, evolving into “contemporary rural elites” who are deeply rooted in their communities, dedicated to contributing to their hometowns, and capable of leading positive social trends (Xiao, 2020). However, the cultivation of this spirit during the trainees’ transition from urban learners to rural educators faces multiple challenges, including identity confusion (Liu & Chen, 2022), the impact of urban-rural disparities (Hu, 2022), and conflicting motivations regarding returning to their hometowns (Zhou & Kuang, 2024). Building upon identity theory and relational sociology, this study systematically establishes dual pathways: an “integrated pre-service and post-service mechanism” and an “individual-organization synergy mechanism.” It aims to develop a systematic framework for cultivating the spirit of rural elites among public-funded teacher trainees. This initiative seeks to provide theoretical support and practical solutions for forging a new generation of educators who are deeply rooted in rural communities, dedicated to serving their hometowns, and cultivated in both virtue and competence, thereby empowering the sustainable revitalization of rural education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Training of Public-Funded Teacher Trainees

Public-funded teacher training serves as an effective approach to supplement the teaching workforce and promote balanced educational development. Internationally, scholars argue that such models ensure internal quality through rigorous admission standards and selection procedures (Tatto, 2015), establish curriculum frameworks and quality assurance systems for classroom instruction (Nazeer-Ikeda, 2014), develop graduation competency frameworks (Low & Tan, 2017), and create evaluation frameworks and tools for training programs (Neihart & Lee, 2017). Some researchers advocate specialized rural teacher training programs to enhance trainees’ rural learning experiences, helping them overcome urbanization tendencies and gain authentic exposure to rural education, thereby increasing their commitment to rural teaching (Halsey, 2018). Since 1949, China’s higher normal education tuition system has undergone three phases: primarily free (1949-1996), predominantly fee-based (1997-2006), and a coexistence of free and fee models (2007-present) (Lu, 2007). Current public-funded teacher education in China mainly consists of two models: “national public-funded teacher trainees” and “local public-funded teacher trainees” (also known as rural-oriented public-funded teacher trainees). This study specifically focuses on the latter. In recent years, research on cultivating rural-oriented public-funded teacher trainees has become a prominent academic focus, yielding substantial scholarly achievements. Methodologically, these studies can be categorized into empirical research and theoretical inquiry. Empirical studies have investigated policy attractiveness, curriculum systems, policy awareness, teaching internships, teacher competency, and rural teaching willingness among these trainees (Feng, 2018; Li, 2019; Yang & Li, 2019; Zhu, Wang, & Wu, 2022). Theoretical research has primarily examined risk prevention, training reforms, educational collaboration, institutional values, and identity conflicts in this context (Feng & Liu, 2019; Ren & Chen, 2020; Li, 2020; Su & Huang, 2021; Luo & Tang, 2021; Liu & Chen, 2022).

2.2 The Spirit of Rural Elites

Xiangxian (rural elites) refers to socially distinguished individuals who have made significant contributions through their accomplishments or moral integrity within their rural communities. The spirit of rural elites embodies the essence of traditional xiangxian culture, encompassing patriotic devotion, ethical excellence, social responsibility, and public service (Li, 2020). While the exact term “xiangxian” has no direct equivalent in Western languages, scholars have conducted extensive research on Chinese gentry/elites. Since the 1940s, foreign scholars have analyzed the role of the gentry, often seeing their power as distinct from or mediating state authority—a perspective initiated by Max Weber (1951) in *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. Maurice Freedman later demonstrated through empirical studies that gentry served as intermediaries between state power and local communities, while Kung-chuan Hsiao (1967) similarly argued that structural changes in grassroots society primarily stemmed from power shifts between the state and gentry. Mary B. Rankin further explored this theme using Zhejiang Province during the Tongzhi Restoration as a case study, revealing how local elites actively participated in rural reconstruction and became key players in local governance. In contemporary China, accelerated rural urbanization has led to challenges including the loss of social elites and cultural leaders, disordered internal village governance, and stagnation in rural cultural development. Against this backdrop, there emerges an urgent need for new-era rural elites (xiangxian), their culture, and spirit to address these issues. Since 2014, the academic community has paid close attention to rural elites (xiangxian), new rural elites (xinxiangxian), and their cultural ethos, yielding a series of research achievements. These studies can be categorized into five main types: The first involves calls for cultivating new rural elites based on the needs of rural socio-economic development (Jiang, 2018). The second examines the connotations, characteristics, classifications, and positioning of rural elites and their cultural spirit (Zhang, 2016; Hu & Gao, 2017; Gao, 2019). The third focuses on the roles of rural elites—particularly new ones—in rural construction, development, and revitalization (Li, 2017; Liu & Wang, 2019). The fourth explores the cultural value, construction, and

cultivation of the spirit of rural elites (Ji & Shi, 2018; Gong & Zheng, 2019). The fifth investigates rural teachers as new rural elites (Xiao, 2021; Zhou & He, 2023; Ren & Zhu, 2024). Notably, existing research indicates that rural teachers have been incorporated into the category of new rural elites, becoming representative figures embodying this ethos. The shaping of rural teachers' virtuous image and the cultivation of their spiritual essence have gradually emerged as new focal points. Within the contemporary inquiry of "cultivating rural teachers as new rural elites," how to transform public-funded teacher trainees into educators imbued with the new-era spirit of rural elites has become a crucial research topic.

3. Dual Theoretical Basis for Cultivating the Spirit of Rural Elites

3.1 Identity Theory: Conceptual Anchors for Pre-Service and Post-Service Development

Identity theory illuminates the dynamic process through which individuals continuously question and construct answers to fundamental questions such as "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?", and "Where should I go?" (Erikson, 1968). It encompasses three interwoven dimensions: self-identity (an individual's internal recognition and acceptance of their role), other-identity (society's expectations and evaluations of an individual's role), and collective identity (a person's sense of belonging and shared values within a group).

Public-funded teacher trainees embody multifaceted yet profound identities: As "rural educators," they are professional implementers and guardians of rural education; as "intellectuals," they serve as disseminators, critics, and innovators of rural culture; as "contemporary rural elites," they act as public spiritual exemplars bridging tradition and modernity, guiding moral governance in rural communities. This complex identity transcends simplistic occupational categorization. Cultivating their spirit of rural elites fundamentally involves deepening, consolidating, and elevating their core identity as "contemporary rural elites." This process must initiate during pre-service training. Systematic value guidance, immersion in local culture, and practical experiences help trainees establish self-identification as "future rural elites" (germination of self-identity), understand society's and rural communities' profound expectations for their roles (guidance of other-identity), and develop collective honor and mission regarding the "public-funded trainee group" as a vital force in rural revitalization (laying the foundation for collective identity).

During pre-service training, public-funded teacher trainees undergo foundational knowledge acquisition and initial identity formation. They develop professional awareness as future educators and community leaders. From an identity development perspective, trainees must first embrace their role as teacher candidates. Through structured pedagogical training and practical teaching experiences at training institutions, they gain a comprehensive understanding of educational principles and methodologies. Practical observations in primary/secondary classrooms allow them to experience firsthand the working environment and responsibilities of educators. Simultaneously, their recognition of the spirit of rural elites begins to take root. Institutions employ cultural immersion programs and lectures on exemplary local figures to help trainees understand regional heritage, historical context, and developmental needs, thereby fostering a sense of hometown pride and social responsibility. For instance, inviting renowned community leaders to share stories of contributing to local education inspires trainees to contemplate their own potential contributions. Through such interactions, trainees gradually cultivate an initial understanding of the spirit of rural elites.

As public-funded teacher trainees transition into their professional roles, sustained identity development becomes crucial. These educators face the dual challenge of bridging theoretical knowledge with practical implementation. They must enhance their teaching expertise while actively embodying the spirit of rural elites through concrete actions. By providing professional development support, creating platforms for value realization, and strengthening community integration in rural areas, we can help them solidify their identity as "contemporary rural elites" in daily work. This approach addresses potential identity confusion and value conflicts, facilitating a transformation from external contractual constraints to internal value-driven motivation. Ultimately, this enables the spirit of rural elites to become deeply ingrained as both their professional ethos and life creed.

3.2 Relational Sociology: The Individual-Organization Symbiotic Network

Relational sociology positions individuals as "relational beings" embedded within intricate social networks (Emirbayer, 1997). Their roles, identities, behaviors, and mental worlds are continually shaped and manifested through ongoing interactions with others, groups, and environments. This framework reveals humanity's social nature: individuals are not isolated entities but are deeply embedded in complex relational frameworks; their identities, behaviors, and roles are profoundly shaped by their network positioning, relationship types, and interaction quality (Donati, 2011).

The core characteristics of the public-funded trainee system—targeted enrollment, targeted cultivation, and targeted employment—naturally construct a unique, strong relational network. Through public resource investments, the state establishes contractual agreements with teacher trainees, requiring them to commit to

serving specific rural communities. This institutional arrangement transcends simple job placement, transforming “return to hometown teaching” into a “reintegration into relational structures” that entails multiple role expectations. These intricate relational networks and their dynamic interactions provide fertile ground for nurturing the rural responsibility, public sentiment, and service consciousness inherent in the spirit of rural elites.

Individual Role: Public-funded teacher trainees form the core of cultivating this spirit. Their personal values, interests, and capabilities significantly influence its development. Each trainee possesses unique characteristics and developmental needs, requiring tailored approaches that address individual differences and stimulate intrinsic motivation. For instance, those demonstrating strong aptitude in arts education could be guided to integrate artistic practices with local cultural heritage through community engagement initiatives. Individual initiative and creativity play a pivotal role; without genuine identification with or pursuit of the spirit, even abundant organizational resources would prove ineffective.

Institutional Role (Pre-Service): Educational institutions play a vital role. As pre-service training organizations, teacher training colleges should provide quality learning environments and resources to help trainees build comprehensive knowledge systems and facilitate identity development. By developing well-structured training programs and strengthening faculty teams, schools lay a solid foundation for trainees’ growth. For example, institutions collaborate with local education authorities and schools to establish stable educational practice bases, offering more hands-on opportunities. Additionally, schools emphasize developing teamwork skills and social responsibility through organized activities and volunteer services, enabling trainees to grow through collective experiences.

Organizational Role (Post-Service): In the post-service phase, placement schools and education authorities should provide sustained support and guidance. Schools can enhance professional development through school-based training and teaching seminars. Meanwhile, education departments may establish supportive policies to encourage trainees in contributing to hometown development and educational reforms.

Interdependence: Individuals and organizations maintain an interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship. Organizations provide platforms and resources for personal development, while individuals’ growth energizes organizational advancement. For instance, when public-funded trainees achieve remarkable educational outcomes guided by the spirit of rural elites, they bring positive changes to local education and enhance the reputation of their schools and affiliated organizations. Recognition and support from these institutions further motivate individuals to actively practice this spirit, creating a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement.

Identity theory and relational sociology provide a crucial theoretical foundation for constructing the cultivation mechanism for the spirit of rural elites among public-funded teacher trainees, playing key roles at different stages (pre-service/post-service) and levels (individual/organization).

4. Integrated Pre-Service/Post-Service Mechanism for Cultivating the Spirit of Rural Elites

Cultivating the spirit of rural elites among public-funded teacher trainees is a lifelong project spanning their careers. We must break down barriers between pre-service training and post-service development, building an integrated cultivation system characterized by consistent goals, connected content, and continuous deepening.

4.1 Pre-Service Operational Mechanism: Foundation and Ignition

The pre-service phase serves as the foundational stage for cultivating trainees’ spiritual framework, emotional attitudes, and initial behavioral tendencies rooted in the spirit of rural elites. This essential component must be systematically integrated throughout the talent development process. Universities, as cornerstones of the educational system, shoulder critical responsibilities by employing diverse approaches to guide trainees in developing the spirit of rural elites.

Integrate the Spirit of Rural Elites into Talent Cultivation Programs to Redefine Educational Objectives: As the overarching framework for higher education, academic programs determine curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and evaluation systems (Zhu & Liu, 2014). The precision of talent cultivation goals directly impacts teaching quality and educational outcomes. To establish a pre-service mechanism for nurturing this spirit, we must incorporate the concept of rural elites. For instance, clearly define “future rural educators with profound local sentiment, strong social responsibility, and leadership potential as rural elites” as core program objectives. Graduation requirements should detail the essence of this spirit through knowledge, skills, and competency benchmarks, such as “understanding rural socio-cultural structures,” “mastering rural educational resource development capabilities,” “cultivating awareness of collaborative education among families, schools, and communities,” and “identifying their future roles as rural elites.”

Deeply Integrate the Spirit of Rural Elites into the Curriculum System, Constructing a Multi-Dimensional Cognitive Framework: Curriculum development is core to pre-service teacher training. Higher education

institutions should incorporate knowledge about this spirit into the curriculum through three key approaches:

Establish Specialized Explicit Courses: Offer courses such as “History of Rural Education Development,” “Rural China and Rural Education,” “Rural Social Governance and Teacher Roles,” “Rural Sociology,” and “Educational Ethics” as required or elective courses. These systematically explain the historical origins, contemporary value, and practical applications of the spirit of rural elites in rural education.

Embed Elements into Professional Courses: Integrate elements of this spirit into courses like pedagogical methodologies, Chinese educational history, and classroom management. For example, highlight exemplary deeds and educational philosophies of historical rural educator-elites to demonstrate their crucial contributions. Emphasize the value of local literature in language teaching and incorporate collaborative scenarios involving families, schools, and communities in classroom management.

Strengthen the “Rural Orientation” in Practical Education: Establish stable rural educational practice bases and organize trainees to conduct teaching observations and research at rural schools. Enhance rural school internships by including specialized tasks like “local cultural immersion” (e.g., investigating rural elites) and “embodying grassroots service” (e.g., participating in community initiatives), allowing participants to experience the dedication of local role models. Encourage trainees to engage in volunteer teaching programs in rural areas, strengthening their sense of belonging and commitment.

Infuse the Educational Context with the Spirit of Rural Elites, Employing Diversified Approaches to Activate Emotional Resonance: Teaching is central to university talent cultivation, serving crucial roles in knowledge transmission, skill development, and quality enhancement (Xie, 2014). Adopt methods like case-based teaching, scenario simulations, and project-based learning to engage students in in-depth discussions on topics such as “current issues in rural education,” “exemplary rural teacher-elites,” and “challenges in preserving local cultural heritage,” thereby stimulating emotional resonance and critical thinking.

Case-Based Teaching: Utilize authentic cases of rural teachers embodying the spirit, analyzing their traits, behaviors, and success factors.

Scenario Simulations: Design complex rural education scenarios (e.g., parent-teacher conflicts, innovative teaching, cultural preservation), enabling trainees to experience decision-making and develop essential communication, coordination, and leadership skills.

Project-Based Learning: Focus on real-world rural issues (e.g., caring for left-behind children, developing local curriculum resources, promoting cultural heritage), forming interdisciplinary student teams to tackle these challenges, cultivating a sense of rural responsibility.

Role Model Influence: Regularly invite outstanding public-funded trainees or rural teachers deeply rooted in and serving their communities to return for exchanges, enhancing the influence of role models and the attractiveness of this career path.

4.2 Post-Service Operational Mechanism: Deepening and Practice

After entering the workforce, public-funded teacher trainees’ professional development and career growth play a crucial role in continuously cultivating and strengthening the spirit of rural elites. The post-employment phase serves as the practical arena where this spirit undergoes rigorous testing, deepens internalization, and achieves sustained elevation within the authentic rural context. This stage marks the core transition from cognitive recognition to behavioral manifestation, and from individual enlightenment to social value realization.

Provide Tailored Post-Service Professional Development to Deepen the Spirit. As a crucial method for professional growth, post-service training becomes a core vehicle for nurturing this spirit. Local education authorities should conduct comprehensive surveys on practical challenges and competency gaps encountered by trainees in fulfilling their roles as rural elites, organizing regular training sessions. Integrate themes such as rural education development strategies, local curriculum resource development, and innovative inheritance of rural elite culture. Key topics include “The Role and Mission of Rural Educators in the New Era,” “Collaborative Education Strategies for Rural Schools and Communities,” “In-depth Development and Practice of Local Curriculum Resources,” “Educational Approaches for Cultural Heritage Innovation in Rural Areas,” and “Teacher Leadership in Rural Education Governance.” These sessions emphasize the significance and value of preserving and practicing the spirit. Through this training, trainees gain insights into rural education developments, master practical methods for applying the spirit, and deepen their understanding of its cultural essence.

Actively Establish Diversified Practical Platforms to Facilitate Transformation into Concrete Actions. Post-service development requires support from professional platforms. Creating diverse practice and exchange stages enables the transformation of the spirit of rural elites into actionable practices.

Build Professional Learning Communities: Establish “Public-Funded Teacher Trainee Growth Communities” at

county or school district levels, organizing online and offline thematic teaching research, experience sharing, case studies, and reading salons to foster collaboration and mutual growth. For instance, rural schools encourage trainees to participate in research projects like “Developing Characteristic Curriculum for Rural Education.” During this process, trainees delve into local cultural resources, creating school-based curricula with regional characteristics, enriching the curriculum system while inheriting and practicing the spirit.

Establish Community Integration Platforms: Encourage and support trainees to participate in village council meetings, cultural activities, and volunteer organizations, engaging in rural governance, cultural preservation, and public services, promoting the spirit’s transition from theory to practice.

Build Online Support Platforms: Leverage information technology to establish cross-regional online communities for resource sharing, discussion of challenges, and seeking support.

Organize Recognition Events: Conduct events such as “Rural Teacher Spirit Sharing Sessions,” “Local Education Innovation Exhibitions,” and “Most Outstanding Rural Teacher” selections. These initiatives enhance the visibility and prestige of the spirit among trainees, promoting its practical implementation.

Cultivate a Campus Culture that Honors Teachers and Values the Educator-Elite Role. Rural schools are the trainees’ workplace. The cultural environment significantly influences the deepening and practical application of their commitment to this spirit. Actively fostering a culture that honors teachers and values the educator-elite role enhances cultivation effectiveness.

Educational Integration: Prioritize nurturing this spirit by exploring the integration of “cultivating new-era educator-elites” as a key faculty development objective, embedding it into school goals, mottos, traditions, and practices.

Institutional Frameworks: Revise teacher evaluation systems to include contributions such as community service, cultural heritage preservation, and local curriculum development as key assessment criteria, providing appropriate resource allocation and incentives.

Exemplary Promotion: Establish role models of teachers rooted in and serving their communities, publicizing outstanding educators embodying the spirit, and creating “Rural Elite Teacher Studios” to inspire through relatable stories, cultivating a strong organizational culture of professional ethics, responsibility, and service to the hometown community.

4.3 Pre-Service/Post-Service Integration Mechanism: Seamless Connection and Continuous Growth

The pre-service and post-service operational mechanisms should not be isolated but interconnected, forming an integrated system. This seamless mechanism combines pre-service training with post-service development to create a coherent framework for nurturing the spirit of rural elites. Breaking down barriers ensures continuity in spiritual cultivation. Establishing this integrated mechanism is crucial for maintaining continuity and effectiveness. To achieve seamless and sustained reinforcement, the key lies in creating a coordinated system featuring information sharing, feedback adjustment, and resource connectivity.

Information Sharing for Integrated Tracking. Provincial education authorities or designated universities should establish a comprehensive information database covering trainees’ entire career cycle—from enrollment to post-service development. This database should document academic performance, internship experiences, professional training, work achievements, and exemplary practices in rural governance, forming a tracking platform for “cultivation-employment-development” trajectories. Leveraging this foundation, establish regular feedback mechanisms between training institutions and employers. Training institutions can monitor graduates’ career progression to refine pre-service programs and optimize cultivation strategies. Employers can utilize student profiles to enhance job placement and career guidance, strengthening cultivation outcomes and achieving precise alignment between talent supply and demand.

Resource Connectivity through Collaborative Platforms. Building upon tripartite training agreements, universities, local authorities, and schools should form collaborative training communities, strengthening partnerships and enhancing connections.

Joint Teaching Research: University faculty, local education specialists, and outstanding rural teachers form collaborative teams to jointly develop training programs, design curricula, address challenges in cultivating the spirit, and co-create educational resources for pre-service and post-service stages, reinforcing the cultivation system.

Dual Mentorship Model: Explore a “dual mentorship” system combining university instructors with rural school mentors to provide continuous professional guidance and inspiration. Throughout both phases, university and rural educators collaborate to help trainees understand, appreciate, and practice the spirit. Simultaneously, university faculty provide teaching guidance in rural schools, while rural teachers participate in university training programs, continuously improving trainee development quality and solidifying the cultivation

mechanism.

In general, the integrated pre-service/post-service mechanism for cultivating the spirit of rural elites can provide a favorable environment and conditions for the growth and development of public-funded teacher trainees, serving as an important guarantee for the generation of this spirit.

5. Individual-Organization Synergy Mechanism for Cultivating the Spirit of Rural Elites Among Public-Funded Teacher Trainees

The emergence of the spirit of rural elites results from the co-construction of internal consciousness and the external environment, necessitating resonance between individual initiative and organizational support. The synergy between individuals and organizations constitutes another critical mechanism for cultivating this spirit among public-funded teacher trainees.

5.1 Individual-Level Mechanisms: Awakening Endogenous Motivation

The cultivation of the spirit of rural elites relies on both personal awakening and proactive engagement. Inner awakening forms the bedrock for nurturing this ethos. When individuals genuinely explore and understand the virtues embodied by rural elites—such as philanthropy, professional dedication, and educational commitment—they develop a true appreciation for its value. Proactive engagement then provides the nourishment that allows this spirit to flourish. Individuals must not merely acknowledge the spirit but actively integrate it into daily life and actions, perpetuating and advancing it through personal practice. This underscores that individual-level mechanisms play a fundamental role in cultivation, focusing on trainees' self-awareness development, value formation, and behavioral refinement.

Self-Awareness Awakening: The primary task is to awaken trainees' profound understanding and inner recognition of the spirit of rural elites. Only when trainees genuinely comprehend the qualities of dedication, responsibility, and leadership inherent in this spirit, and embrace its value and significance, can they internalize it as a personal conviction. This enables them to actively practice the spirit as role models when serving rural education, thereby contributing to its development and comprehensive rural revitalization. Through pre-service training and post-service guidance, instructors can employ inquiry-based thinking and guided reflection to help trainees deeply explore questions like "Why did I choose to become a rural educator?", "What do I understand about the spirit of rural elites?", and "What educational ideals do I hope to achieve in rural areas?" This process helps them grasp the complexity of rural education challenges, proactively seek solutions, experience responsibility and value through problem-solving, strengthen confidence and capability in transforming the rural educational ecosystem, gradually comprehend, judge, and affirm the spirit and its value, continuously examine their own behaviors and motivations in assuming the role of rural elites, achieve conscious growth of this spirit, and even integrate it into their career aspirations and life planning.

Value Internalization: The core mission is to guide trainees in internalizing the spirit of rural elites as a value framework. Cultivation should not remain at the level of external advocacy but must evolve from superficial acceptance to deep internalization, achieving a transformation from "external norms" to "internal awareness." Only when elements of the spirit—such as national sentiment, local identity, and dedication—truly integrate into trainees' ideological concepts and value systems, forming unique value frameworks, can the spirit exert powerful spiritual leadership. Only then can trainees consciously adopt it as their value compass, truly practicing it in rural schools and communities by understanding local conditions, fulfilling responsibilities, and implementing actions, striving to become new rural elites. This necessitates emphasizing hands-on experiences. For instance, through close observation of rural elites' practical actions in rural governance, educational support, and cultural preservation, witnessing their exemplary conduct and sense of responsibility, trainees can profoundly appreciate the positive impact of the spirit on rural society. This leads to deep emotional resonance and the gradual formation of a value system centered on patriotism, attachment to hometowns, and selfless dedication.

Behavioral Cultivation: A crucial mission is to facilitate the externalization of the internalized spirit into practical actions. Cultivation should not remain theoretical or aspirational—it requires demonstration through concrete deeds. Only through continuous refinement in practice can the spirit truly become an internalized and externally manifested conscious action. The practical implementation means trainees must not only deeply understand the spirit's cultural essence and value theoretically but also actively practice it through daily teaching activities and engagement in rural social affairs. Specifically: On the podium, they should impart knowledge with profound responsibility and mission, enlightening students' minds and becoming spiritual beacons. Beyond the classroom, they should proactively engage in rural development, participate in community building, care for villagers' well-being, and demonstrate the spirit of "applying knowledge to benefit rural areas" through concrete actions. This cultivation represents a continuous transformation from theory to practice, from cognition to action, demanding that trainees embody the spirit and translate it into tangible contributions to rural education and development.

5.2 Organizational-Level Mechanisms: Creating Fertile External Ground

An organizational environment, much like soil, profoundly shapes the direction and growth of individuals' spiritual development. A responsible and mission-driven organizational atmosphere nurtures trainees' spirit of rural elites as gently as spring rain nourishes vegetation. Organizational mechanisms aim to create an ecosystem conducive to this cultivation. Within this system, organizations serve not only as fertile ground but also as indispensable catalysts for vigorous growth. As a crucial safeguard, these mechanisms leverage the collective efforts of schools, governments, and social organizations to establish an optimal environment.

Role of Educational Institutions: Just as schools play a leading role in human development, pre-service training institutions and post-service placement schools serve as pivotal platforms for cultivation. On one hand, educational institutions can foster this ethos through curriculum design. For instance, specialized courses on rural education can help students understand its historical context, current status, and future trends, strengthening their sense of identity and mission. Institutions may also organize thematic activities such as storytelling sessions, documentary screenings, and case studies to vividly demonstrate the practical manifestations and noble values of rural elites, inspiring trainees to embrace the spirit. On the other hand, leaders at post-service schools should lead by example, promoting values like serving rural communities, taking responsibility, and making selfless contributions, setting a model for trainees. Additionally, schools can integrate the spirit into institutional culture through systems, ceremonies, stories, and symbolic elements, creating an organizational environment conducive to its nurturing.

Role of Government: The government plays a guiding and supportive role in the institutional framework. By formulating scientific educational policies, optimizing resource allocation, and enhancing teacher professional development, the government provides solid institutional safeguards and practical platforms. It can effectively elevate the social status of rural teachers, ensure their benefits and professional dignity, fostering a strong societal atmosphere of respecting educators. This allows trainees to feel the respect accorded to inheritors of the spirit, igniting their inner sense of mission and responsibility. Additionally, the government could issue dedicated policies elevating the cultivation of rural elites to a strategic level, explicitly designating it as a core objective of the public-funded teacher trainee program. This initiative would grant the cultivation robust policy legitimacy and backing. Simultaneously, at inauguration ceremonies, commendation events, and major festivals for trainees, the government should design solemn and meaningful rituals to reinforce their understanding and identification with the spirit, further inspiring their commitment to serving rural communities. Through its policy decisions, effective actions, and leadership in organizing the cultivation process, the government lays a solid foundation for nurturing outstanding trainees imbued with the spirit, injecting continuous momentum into rural education development.

Role of Social Organizations: Social organizations play a complementary and supportive role. These entities can provide practical platforms and resource support through various channels. For instance, non-profit organizations may collaborate with teacher training institutions to organize volunteer programs in rural education, enabling trainees to engage directly in grassroots teaching practices. Public discourse also serves as an effective catalyst. Media outlets should highlight exemplary cases of outstanding trainees, creating role models that inspire more students to dedicate themselves to rural education. By utilizing diverse platforms including newspapers, television, and digital media, the positive contributions of these trainees to rural development and their exemplary conduct can be effectively showcased. This approach helps establish their positive public image, enhances their professional prestige and social recognition, thereby solidifying the tangible outcomes of cultivating the spirit of rural elites.

5.3 Individual-Organization Synergistic Integration: Value Co-Creation and Ecological Optimization

Individuals and organizations are not isolated entities; they require the establishment of an interactive, mutually reinforcing collaborative ecosystem. In cultivating the spirit of rural elites, individual-level mechanisms should not be separated from organizational frameworks but should achieve synergistic enhancement through dynamic interaction. For instance, in rural education practice, a trainee might spontaneously develop service aspirations due to emerging local sentiments, while the organization provides growth platforms and resource support through institutional arrangements. This two-way empowerment process not only ignites individuals' sense of responsibility and emotional identification but also strengthens organizational cultural cohesion and value leadership. Only through this approach can we establish an integrated cultivation mechanism—grounded in individual initiative and supported by organizational guidance—achieving deep integration between spiritual inheritance and educational missions. Therefore, the synergistic integration mechanism can fully leverage the strengths of both parties, maximizing cultivation effectiveness.

Organizational Support Empowers Individuals: Schools, governments, and society provide strong external empowerment through key approaches: offering role models (to inspire emulation), building platforms (to facilitate proactive engagement), fostering conducive cultural environments (to nurture value beliefs), and

granting public recognition (to enhance role identity).

Individual Practices Enrich Organizations: The educational innovations, cultural preservation, and community services driven by trainees embodying the spirit continuously enrich schools and communities. This process injects new vitality into organizational culture, establishes new benchmarks, validates and reinforces advocated values, ultimately creating a virtuous cycle where organizational contributions feed back into the cultivation system.

Dynamic Synergy: The key lies in establishing dynamic dialogue mechanisms that bridge communication channels, enabling two-way information flow. Individuals provide feedback on practical needs, implementation challenges, and development suggestions to organizations, driving continuous adjustments in support systems and enhancing policy relevance. Organizations optimize resource allocation based on these insights, refine institutional frameworks, and disseminate exemplary practices to establish replicable models. Through sustained interaction and mutual feedback, individuals and organizations form a symbiotic relationship fostering shared prosperity in cultivating the spirit. This collaborative mechanism evolves through positive cycles, effectively strengthening the systematic and sustainable development of the cultivation process, ultimately yielding more outstanding rural educators imbued with the spirit of rural elites.

6. Conclusion

The cultivation of the spirit of rural elites among public-funded teacher trainees is a strategic initiative to address the deep-seated challenges in rural education—such as “unwillingness to relocate, inability to remain long-term, and struggles with teaching effectively”—while activating internal drivers for comprehensive rural revitalization. Grounded in identity theory and relational sociology, this study systematically constructs dual cultivation pathways: an integrated pre-service-post-service mechanism and an individual-organization synergy mechanism. The former focuses on lifelong development over time, emphasizing systematic pre-service foundations and targeted post-service empowerment to ensure continuous cultivation. The latter emphasizes spatial activation and environmental creation, highlighting the need to stimulate trainees’ intrinsic initiative while systematically optimizing external environments (policy support, cultural atmosphere, platform development), thereby achieving resonance between personal value pursuits and organizational-social functions.

The establishment and effective operation of this dual mechanism not only provide trainees with a clear path for spiritual growth and professional development, enabling them to find professional dignity and life value through practicing deeply rooted rural education, but also aim to reshape the spiritual elevation and cultural character of rural education itself. When cohorts of trainees, combining educational wisdom with the responsibility of contemporary rural elites, truly become cultural beacons, moral exemplars, and developmental engines in rural society, rural education can break free from the constraints of instrumental rationality. It can return to its fundamental mission of “nurturing people” and “transforming villages,” becoming a core source of strength that nourishes rural civilization, unites community spirit, and leads rural revitalization. Realizing this vision requires sustained policy support from the state, proactive actions by local governments, deep participation from higher education institutions, and broad acceptance from rural communities. Together, these efforts will lay solid foundations for cultivating the spirit of rural elites among public-funded teacher trainees, composing a magnificent chapter in the revitalization of rural education and cultural renaissance in the new era.

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