

# A Study on the Current Situation and Countermeasure Approaches for the Professional Development of Rural Primary School Teachers in Western China

Yong Yao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chongqing Academy of Education Science, Chongqing, China

Correspondence: Yong Yao, Chongqing Academy of Education Science, Chongqing, China.

doi:10.56397/RAE.2025.02.01

## Abstract

As China strives to build a high-quality education system and accelerate its progress toward becoming a global education powerhouse, the professional development of rural primary school teachers in western regions remains relatively underdeveloped. This is due to historical and regional constraints, further exacerbated by the combined impacts of declining birthrates, urbanization, and an aging population. Addressing this issue has become a critical challenge that must be overcome to achieve high-quality educational development. President Xi Jinping has highlighted that rural revitalization ultimately hinges on talent, and the development of talent relies fundamentally on education. The development of rural education is undeniably a key pillar of the rural revitalization strategy, with rural teachers being at the heart of this effort. Their professional growth not only directly influences the quality of education in rural areas but also plays a critical role in narrowing the educational disparities between urban and rural regions, different areas, schools, and social groups. This is essential for building a fair and high-quality basic education system. This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state of professional development for rural primary school teachers in western China, accurately identifying existing challenges and their underlying causes. The goal is to establish a holistic, multi-tiered support system that will provide strong impetus for the professional development of rural primary school teachers.

**Keywords:** rural primary school teachers, the professional development, strategies for promoting

## 1. The Current Status of Professional Development for Rural Primary School Teachers in Western China

Compared to the economically developed eastern regions, the teacher workforce in rural primary schools in western China displays distinct regional and historical characteristics in terms of quantity, structure, quality, and compensation.

### 1.1 Imbalance in the Quantity and Subject Distribution of Rural Teachers

For an extended period, western rural areas have been hindered by factors such as slow economic development and inadequate educational investment, leading to a general shortage of primary school teachers. Particularly in remote areas, poor transportation and challenging living and working conditions contribute to high teacher turnover, making it difficult to establish a stable and qualified teaching workforce. In terms of subject distribution, teachers for core subjects like Chinese, mathematics, and English are relatively concentrated, while there is a structural shortage of teachers in subjects such as music, physical education, art, science, labor, and mental health. This imbalance in subject allocation further hinders the comprehensive development of quality education in rural primary schools.

### 1.2 The Gap Between Rural Teachers' Professional Competence and Subject Requirements

Currently, primary school teachers in rural areas of Western China primarily rely on fragmented and informal approaches for professional development. These include participating in training programs, self-directed learning, and school-based workshops to explore advanced educational theories, refine teaching concepts, and enhance instructional skills. In the remote rural regions of Western China, the unequal distribution of educational resources remains a significant challenge. As new subject knowledge and teaching methods continue to emerge, enhancing the teaching skills of rural primary school teachers has become imperative to meet the evolving demands of modern education. Due to the absence of systematic channels for studying educational theory, teachers are eager to enrich their theoretical knowledge through training, striving to strengthen the scientific foundation of their teaching practices. Constrained by limited educational resources and scarce training opportunities, rural primary school teachers tend to have lower overall educational qualifications, with significant disparities in their teaching capabilities. Some teachers hold outdated educational beliefs and lack modern teaching skills, continuing to rely on traditional methods that fail to meet the demands of today's information-based and diverse educational landscape. This not only hampers the improvement of teaching quality but also restricts students' holistic development and their ability to foster innovation.

### *1.3 The Imbalance Between Rural Teachers' Salaries and Performance Evaluation*

Due to the underdeveloped economy in the western regions, local governments have limited resources for educational investment, leading to relatively low salaries and inadequate benefits for rural primary school teachers. In recent years, the national focus on rural education has intensified, with governments at all levels increasing investments and introducing favorable policies to offer rural primary school teachers more training opportunities and avenues for professional growth. For example, support from universities and nonprofit organizations offers new learning opportunities for teachers. However, factors such as remote locations and the time commitment required for training hinder teachers' professional growth and the overall improvement of rural education quality. These challenges also affect teachers' sense of professional identity and motivation, contributing to the continued loss of talented educators and further weakening the teaching workforce in rural primary schools.

## **2. An Analysis of Factors Influencing the Professional Development of Rural Primary School Teachers in Western China**

### *2.1 Insufficient External Support and Safeguards*

The uneven distribution of educational resources and teaching staff remains a major challenge for the development of rural primary schools in Western China, particularly evident in the disparities in teacher allocation, instructional equipment, and library resources. Some rural primary schools, hindered by remote locations and underdeveloped transportation, face challenges in attracting qualified teachers, leading to relatively weak teaching staff. The modernization of teaching equipment has lagged behind, failing to meet the demands of contemporary education. For example, due to limited funding, rural primary schools often have insufficient book collections, with updates occurring infrequently, making it challenging to satisfy the growing reading needs of teachers and students. For instance, in terms of teacher allocation, there is a structural shortage of staff, particularly in specialized subjects such as calligraphy, music, art, and science. This has led to the incomplete delivery of these courses, negatively impacting the teaching quality in rural primary schools and hindering the overall development of students.

### *2.2 Ineffective Targeted Training*

The training content emphasizes theoretical research but lacks specialized programs tailored to rural education, such as local culture and agricultural knowledge. This restricts rural teachers' ability to effectively serve rural students and impedes the development of rural education. At the same time, the training methods are relatively rigid, primarily relying on face-to-face lectures and seminars. There is a lack of flexible formats, such as periodic on-the-job training or shadowing programs, which fail to address teachers' diverse learning needs. This impacts the effectiveness of the training, as teachers are unable to tailor the content and methods to their individual circumstances.

### *2.3 Lack of Sufficient Internal Motivation*

In the western regions, rural primary school teachers generally lack a strong awareness of professional self-development. Some teachers have limited self-awareness, with unclear career development plans and goals, making it difficult for them to identify learning needs and directions. This hampers their motivation for self-improvement and reduces the effectiveness of their growth. At the same time, some teachers lack a commitment to continuous learning, making it difficult for them to keep pace with educational reforms. When confronted with new teaching challenges, they often lack the necessary knowledge and skills. These factors significantly impede teachers' professional growth and the enhancement of teaching quality.

### *2.4 Incentive Policies Remain Weak*

Currently, the incentive system in rural primary schools mainly relies on traditional material rewards and lacks effective mechanisms to promote teachers' professional development. As a result, teachers tend to prioritize material benefits over the enhancement of their professional skills, which undermines the overall improvement of the teaching staff's quality. At the same time, the government's investment in teachers' professional development is inadequate. Rural primary schools have long struggled with issues such as uneven distribution of educational resources and funding shortages, leading to a severe lack of the necessary funds and resources for teachers' professional growth. As a result, it is difficult to establish effective, comprehensive support throughout the entire development process.

### **3. Strategies for Promoting the Professional Development of Rural Primary School Teachers in Western China**

Based on the current status of professional development for rural primary school teachers in the western regions, the following strategies are proposed to effectively support their professional growth:

#### *3.1 Strengthen the Comprehensive Support System*

Establish a system for the equitable allocation of specialized financial funds and a teacher salary system that reflects the level of economic development. This will address the issue of insufficient investment, balance the psychological disparity in teachers' benefits, and enable teachers to focus on teaching and nurturing students with peace of mind. Firstly, it is crucial to significantly raise the base salary level. Currently, the base salary for rural teachers in the western regions is notably lower than that in surrounding cities and more developed areas. This disparity creates a sense of unfairness among teachers, which, over time, may lead to the loss of talented educators in rural areas. To address this issue, the immediate priority is to increase the salary levels of local rural teachers. It is crucial to take into account not only their basic living expenses but also the additional costs for professional development, such as purchasing materials, and establish a fair and reasonable salary standard. Secondly, it is crucial to establish a clear differentiation in performance-based pay based on teachers' professional values and ethical assessments. The core goal of performance-based pay is to motivate teachers to improve their teaching. The effectiveness of this incentive depends on whether there is a noticeable gap in the pay levels, meaning that teachers with varying performance levels should receive distinct rewards. Only in this way can teachers' motivation for professional development be effectively stimulated. Each region should, based on its financial resources, designate schools as the primary entities for implementing performance-based pay, reasonably determining performance levels and pay differentials. This approach replaces the previous method, where education departments assigned rankings using fixed proportions and controlled pay gaps based on total budgets, often failing to reflect actual performance. By maximizing performance pay whenever possible, teachers' living standards can be effectively improved. Thirdly, it is vital to ensure comprehensive teacher welfare. This includes contributions to social security programs, holiday allowances, and other supportive measures. Such initiatives are key to providing teachers with greater security and strengthening their sense of belonging. Findings from surveys and interviews reveal that teachers often lack a strong sense of collective belonging and exhibit low levels of professional identity and pride. School management tends to focus on administration for its own sake or teaching as a routine task, resulting in a purely transactional approach. Relationships between administrators and teachers are often strained, with an overly bureaucratic atmosphere prevailing. It is recommended to fully address the practical challenges and needs of rural primary school teachers in terms of salary, housing, and healthcare. This includes increasing salary levels, introducing living allowances and remote area subsidies, improving housing conditions, and strengthening the medical support system. Furthermore, teachers should be encouraged to participate in educational research activities, supported in their professional development, and offered diverse promotion pathways. Efforts should also be made to provide more opportunities for teachers to take part in educational management and research projects. For example, in terms of holiday welfare, schools should establish reasonable policies. For important holidays like International Women's Day or Teacher's Day, teachers should receive a form of welfare allowance, such as a small monetary amount, at least a few hundred yuan or the purchase of daily essentials. However, this study suggests that schools could enhance the content of these allowances from a professional development perspective. For instance, offering teachers book vouchers or access to online courses would allow limited funds to be more effectively invested in teachers' professional growth.

#### *3.2 Enhance the Full-Cycle Training Support System*

To address the issues of limited training methods and unequal opportunities for teachers in rural primary schools, it is crucial to establish a scientific training system and evaluation framework for in-service teacher development. Firstly, a diversified professional training system should be established. This can be achieved by expanding the methods and channels of training. When selecting training content, it should be tailored to the specific needs of different teachers and closely aligned with the realities of rural education. The goal is to avoid a generic approach and ensure that teachers' valuable time and energy for professional growth are used efficiently.

To ensure equal access to training opportunities, efforts should be made to extend the training system to benefit all teachers as much as possible. Additionally, training opportunities can be linked to teacher evaluations and awards, using training as a form of motivation. For example, through collaboration on centralized training, teaching outreach to rural areas, and research projects, resources can be shared, training quality can be enhanced, and the balanced development of urban and rural educational resources can be promoted. Moreover, integrating online and offline training, leveraging modern technology, can break geographic barriers and facilitate the widespread distribution of high-quality training resources. Fully leverage internal training resources within the school by organizing activities such as research seminars, teaching skill competitions, and experience-sharing sessions. These initiatives can inspire teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, enhance their skills, and foster a stronger sense of teamwork and belonging. Additionally, arrange teaching observation activities, where teachers can visit high-quality schools to observe exemplary teachers in action. This allows them to learn teaching techniques, classroom management strategies, and methods for teacher-student interaction, while promoting collaboration, exchange, and intellectual engagement among teachers. Encourage teachers to pursue self-directed learning by providing access to diverse learning resources through schools and education departments. Establish incentive mechanisms to recognize and reward teachers who actively engage in learning and demonstrate significant progress in their professional development. Additionally, develop a scientific and well-structured evaluation system to measure the effectiveness of training. This can include methods such as classroom observations, teaching case analyses, and student performance assessments. Regular evaluations should be conducted to ensure that training results are effectively integrated into teaching practice. Second, develop a scientific and balanced system for evaluating teachers' professional development. Move beyond traditional practices that overemphasize academic performance at the expense of moral education, prioritize teaching over character building, focus on test scores rather than holistic growth, and value academics over student well-being. Avoid narrow measures such as ranking teachers solely by student performance or labeling students based on their test scores. Incorporate the mastery and application of professional development knowledge as a key evaluation criterion for teachers, while also integrating specific metrics such as growth in professional expertise, salary progression, professional title evaluations, and teacher retention rates. These measures can encourage local governments and schools to prioritize teachers' professional growth, working conditions, and overall well-being. By continuously enhancing teacher benefits and providing more opportunities and pathways for professional development, a more supportive and growth-oriented environment can be established. Third, implement a fair and balanced system for assigning teaching workloads. Establish a regular recruitment mechanism to strengthen the rural teaching workforce by encouraging recent graduates to teach in rural areas. Support this initiative with targeted incentives and subsidies, providing graduates with valuable teaching experience while addressing teacher shortages in rural schools. Particularly in implementing quality education, rural primary schools must move beyond the outdated practice of measuring success solely by rate of admittance of students taking secondary school. Instead, they should encourage teachers to innovate their teaching methods and enhance their instructional skills, fostering the holistic development of students. This approach not only accelerates teachers' professional growth but also lightens their workload, allowing more time for self-improvement and continued learning.

### *3.3 Develop a Collaborative System Throughout the Entire Process*

To address the issue of insufficient professional capabilities among teachers, it is essential to strengthen institutional design and establish platforms for capacity building. First, an inter-school cooperation system should be established within the region. This involves improving mechanisms for the cross-regional allocation of quality basic education resources and actively promoting reforms in cross-regional education communities. It is important to strengthen the development of closely-knit education communities within the region, focusing on six areas of integration: educational management, team development, teaching research and training, resource utilization, talent development, and evaluation. By organizing educational experts and key teachers to conduct special lectures, outreach teaching activities, and share advanced educational ideas and teaching methods, high-quality educational resources can be effectively directed to underserved areas and schools. This approach will foster coordinated educational development across regions, urban and rural areas, schools, and educational stages, ultimately guiding and enhancing the professional growth of teachers in rural schools. At the same time, urban primary schools should leverage advanced internet technologies to build online platforms for sharing high-quality teaching resources, striving to achieve the sharing of educational resources between urban and rural areas. Secondly, a teacher rotation and exchange system should be established between underdeveloped and developed areas. Teacher rotation is an important avenue for professional development. It is essential to improve urban-rural support and incentive mechanisms, coordinate quality resources from national targeted assistance, east-west poverty alleviation cooperation, and paired support, and enhance teacher exchanges between urban and rural areas. Establishing online teaching discussion communities and consistently expanding the scope of teacher rotations between rural primary schools and urban schools will help facilitate the sharing of advanced

experiences and foster intellectual exchanges. Every year, a group of teachers should be regularly sent for rotation to key schools, broadening the channels for resource sharing, improving rural teachers' professional competence and teaching abilities, and enabling them to learn more advanced educational concepts and improve their teaching skills.

Thirdly, a diversified teacher evaluation and assessment system should be established. Teacher evaluation is closely linked to professional development. Schools should further enrich the evaluation system, reduce the emphasis on student performance in the evaluation criteria, and increase the focus on teachers' professional knowledge, abilities, educational philosophy, and professional ethics. Indicators such as improvements in teachers' abilities, student evaluations of teaching, and overall professional development should also be important criteria. A reasonable weighting of these indicators will make the evaluation process more comprehensive and better aligned with the goals of promoting professional growth.

Additionally, the government should use various media channels to widely promote the importance of rural education and the dedication of rural teachers, showcasing the achievements of education in rural areas and the individual accomplishments of teachers. Moreover, regular public welfare activities, such as university student volunteer teaching and social volunteer services, should be organized to attract public attention, guide talented individuals to join the development of rural primary education, and enhance society's recognition and reputation of rural education.

### 3.4 Establish a Full-Chain Environmental Support System

To fully stimulate teachers' awareness of self-development and comprehensively promote the professional growth of rural primary school teachers, the first step is to establish a correct career perspective. By organizing career value seminars and inviting education experts to hold specialized lectures on career value, rural primary school teachers can be guided to deeply recognize the significant value of their profession. A comprehensive incentive mechanism should be established, including the creation of career development honors awards for teachers who excel in their educational work and make outstanding contributions to the development of rural education. The organization of themed teaching research activities, project applications, and other initiatives should provide platforms for teachers to closely integrate their acquired knowledge with rural education practices, contributing wisdom and strength to the development of rural education. Additionally, more promotion opportunities and career development spaces should be offered to teachers, stimulating their passion for the profession and sense of responsibility, and enhancing their determination for long-term development in the field of rural education. Second, a positive learning atmosphere should be cultivated. Schools should focus on creating an open, inclusive, and positive learning environment, establishing a comprehensive learning resource management system. This includes purchasing a wide range of educational books, journals, and magazines, setting up digital learning platforms, offering online courses, academic databases, teaching case repositories, etc. Regular teaching seminars and academic lectures should be organized, and teachers should be encouraged to engage in teaching collaborations and research project partnerships. This will facilitate information sharing and resource exchange, motivating teachers to improve their teaching skills and collaboratively advance the overall quality of education in rural primary schools. Third, we should promote the recognition and application of excellent results. By organizing demonstration classes, holding teaching achievement promotion meetings, publishing research results and other ways, the excellent teaching results are promoted and applied in a wider range. Let the excellent teaching results become a model for other teachers to learn, and promote the overall teaching level of rural primary school teachers. Reward and support teachers who promote excellent teaching results, enhance the visibility and influence of teachers, and provide more development opportunities and growth space for teachers.

### References

- Chen Yongming, (1999). *Modern Teachers' Theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press.
- Gao Xia, Yang Mingquan, (2005). *Teacher's View and Teacher's Role Transformation under the New Curriculum*. Beijing: Capital Normal University Press.
- Hu Peiqing, (2010). Research on school management mechanism of teachers' professional development. Fujian Normal University.
- Liu Jie, (2002). *Professionalization: Challenging the Teacher in the 21st Century*. Beijing: Educational Science Press.
- Lu Hong, (2009). Dilemma of professional development of rural teachers and the strategy of dissolution. *Education theory and practice*, (S1).
- Qiao Hui, (2009). Effective support for rural teachers' professional development. *Theory and Practice of Education*, (11).

- Ran Xiaoyan and Zhu Songhua, (2004). Curriculum reform calls for teachers' professional autonomy. *Education and Vocation*, 15.
- Tan Rongbo, (2008). Survey research on the professional development of rural elementary school teachers. *Forum on Contemporary Education (Principal Education Research)*, (11).
- Taylor, (1994). *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Wang Dingwei, (2009). Three ways to promote the professional development of rural teachers. *Education Science Forum*, 05.
- Wang Jianjun, (2004). *Curriculum Change and Teacher Professional Development*. Sichuan: Sichuan Education Press.
- Weng Yongdian, (2009). Dilemma and way out of professional development of rural teachers. *Shanghai Research on Education*, (01).
- Xie Wei, Zhou Aizhen, (2012). Exploring the training needs of rural elementary school teachers. *Continue Education Research*, (01).
- Xu Bimei, (2004). *Pursuing Excellence — A Case Study of Teachers' Professional Development* (Chen Jing, Li Zhongru Trans.). Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Xu Jicun, (2004). *Introduction to Teaching Theory*. Gansu: Gansu Education Press.
- Xu Jun, (2015). Self-directed learning: An effective way for rural teachers' professional development. *Teacher Education Research*, (03).
- Ye Lan et al., (2001). *New Exploration of Teacher Role and Teacher Development*. Beijing: Education Science Press.
- Zhong Qiquan, (2002). *Introduction to Educational Methods*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).