

A Study of Teacher Attrition in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools under the Background of Rural Revitalization: A Survey in Y County, Yunnan Province

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Abstract: *The key to rural revitalization lies in people, and the key to rural education revitalization lies in cultivating a rural teacher team that can be attracted and retained. However, there is still a serious problem of rural teacher loss in Yunnan province's rural education. After investigation, it was found that this is mainly due to external and internal factors. External factors include a large income gap between urban and rural teachers, and late salary payments. Rural teachers have low social status and occupational well-being. Internal factors include difficulties in adapting to rural life, lack of belongingness, excessive pressure, resulting in professional burnout and teacher loss. Therefore, in the author's opinion, attention should be paid to the introduction of talent for rural basic education. Through policy guidance, rural teacher income should be increased, model examples should be vigorously propagated to improve the social status of rural teachers, and promotion channels for teachers should be unblocked to enhance the attractiveness of rural talent acquisition. The goal is to create a rural teacher team that loves the countryside, is sufficient in quantity, has good quality, and is full of vitality, serving the purpose of rural revitalization.*

Keywords: *rural revitalization, rural teacher, teacher loss*

1. Introduction

In 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued the "Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020)" and proposed to cultivate a group of teachers who love and are willing to dedicate themselves to rural education, and have good quality by 2020, providing strong teacher support for the basic realization of educational modernization[1]. According to statistics, in 2020, there were more than 2.9 million rural teachers in China, accounting for around one-quarter of the total population. Rural teachers are an important force for rural revitalization, but it was found through actual research that there is a serious problem of teacher loss, which hinders the development of rural basic education and goes against the original intention of rural revitalization[2]. This study aims to explore the root causes of rural teacher loss through on-site investigation in Y County, Yunnan Province, with the goal of alleviating the current situation of rural teacher loss.

2. The urgency of solving the problem of rural teacher loss

In the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the first proposed the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, and pointed out that "encouraging and guiding talents to flow to remote and impoverished areas, ethnic minority areas, revolutionary old areas, and the frontline of grassroots." In February 2022, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talent", which clearly stated that "the key to rural revitalization lies in people". This fully demonstrates that China attaches great importance to the introduction and cultivation of talents in the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. To improve the level of rural revitalization construction, talent is the key, education is the focus, basic education is the foundation, and rural teachers are the basic support for conducting rural education and an important source for promoting rural revitalization [3].

The revitalization of rural education is of even greater strategic significance for Yunnan Province, which is located in the southwest border of China. Due to a variety of reasons such as history and geography, Yunnan has a wide area of poverty and a deep degree of poverty. With the leadership of the Party and the joint efforts of the people across the country, all the rural poor population under the current poverty standard in Yunnan Province was lifted out of poverty by the end of 2020 and the longstanding problem of poverty in Yunnan was historically resolved. However, during the critical period of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, various contradictions have gradually emerged. According to the 7th National Population Census Bulletin in 2021, the average education years for the population aged 15 and above in Yunnan Province in 2020 was below the national average level, and the illiteracy rate was 1.98 percentage points higher than the national illiteracy rate. In addition, there is a shortage of professional talents, and the development of basic education has been greatly restricted, lagging behind most provinces and cities in China. Therefore, Yunnan needs to build a solid foundation in basic education in order to build a beautiful "building" for rural revitalization. To achieve this, it is even more important to have a sufficient, high-quality, and dynamic rural teacher team that loves the countryside, who are the source of vitality for rural education [4]. However, investigations have shown that the loss of outstanding rural teachers is serious and it is difficult to fill these positions. In addition, the low salary of rural teachers, weak attraction of schools to teachers, "separation of school and family" for non-local teachers, and the large teaching pressure faced by rural teachers have collectively limited the overall vitality of the rural teacher team. For a long time, rural primary and secondary school teachers have faced the problem of being unable to "go down" or "stay" [5]. In ethnic minority areas, this problem is even more prominent. This article is based on investigations in Y County, Yunnan Province, which analyzes the reasons for the loss of rural primary and secondary school teachers from external and internal factors, and explores the root causes of rural teacher loss.

3. Reasons for the loss of rural teachers

3.1 External factors

3.1.1 Inadequate policy incentive mechanisms and imperfect management system

If it were not for the coordination and promotion of governments at all levels, the construction of rural teacher teams would be difficult to be effective. Many rural teachers in ethnic minority areas want to leave due to the inadequate infrastructure, old teacher dormitories, simple medical conditions, and limited teaching resources in rural primary and secondary schools [6]. Furthermore, local governments' policies are not refined according to the actual situation, such as understanding funds as merely being used to pay teachers' salaries, while neglecting the improvement of teachers' living environment and the construction of school medical rooms [7]. There are also flaws in the internal management system of rural central schools in various regions. We found in our research that some schools evaluate teachers based solely on their scores, while the schools stipulate that teachers who rank among the lowest in teaching subjects must face the risk of being transferred to remote rural schools. Rewards for teachers are also mainly based on grades.

3.1.2 Large income gap between urban and rural teachers, delayed payment of wages

Teachers' income is the basis for guaranteeing their survival needs, development needs, and enjoyment needs. However, from the current income level of teachers, the salary of rural teachers can only guarantee basic living expenses. China's "Education Law" stipulates that the salaries of teachers during the compulsory education stage shall not be lower than or slightly higher than the average salary level of local civil servants, but in reality, there is a certain gap between the salaries of some teachers and civil servants. According to surveys, in addition to a basic salary, Y county also provides rural teachers with corresponding subsidies (ranging from 500 to 2,500 yuan). However, the monthly salary of rural teachers is still lower than that of urban teachers. For example, the monthly salary of new rural teachers in Y County ranged from 2000 to 3000 yuan in 2015 and from 3000 to 4500 yuan in 2020, while the monthly salary of urban teachers could reach around 4500 yuan for those who started their jobs in 2015 and around 5200 yuan for those who started in 2020 [8]. Furthermore, there are problems of unstable, delayed, and arrears of pay for rural teachers, which harm their legitimate rights and interests, greatly affect their lives, and cause problems for teachers to devote themselves to teaching activities.

3.1.3 Low social status of rural teachers and low occupational happiness

The rapid development of modern society and the prevalence of utilitarianism make people often

judge the standards of a profession based on its remuneration. Compared with urban teachers, rural teachers have lower economic income. Therefore, some people may have the idea that although they are all teachers, rural teachers are inferior. In our study, we found that some rural teachers are not confident compared with urban teachers. When it comes to the "dedication of rural teachers" and their "commitment to the position," everyone will show respect [9]. However, when it comes to rural teachers in general, they are just "teaching in the countryside." Furthermore, the promotion of rural teachers' professional titles and the evaluation of senior titles lag behind those of urban teachers. If rural teachers pass the exam to work in a city school (according to local regulations, rural teachers can apply to take the exam after working for three years in one place), they need to lower their rank. In addition, there are lengthy and difficult issues surrounding their honor appraisal. For example, at A Primary School in Y County, most of the students are ethnic minority children of Yi and Miao, and in grades 1-2, most of the children cannot understand Mandarin. It takes one to two years of teaching for teachers to gradually communicate with them using Mandarin. Most young adults in the village go out to work, and children live with elderly family members. There are communication difficulties and untimely communication between parents and teachers in the process of home-school cooperation. Some elderly people even believe that teachers should be fully responsible for children once they are entrusted to the school, and they will cause trouble for teachers when their children have learning problems. Therefore, some rural teachers resign because they are not respected and cannot obtain occupational happiness in their work.

3.2 Internal factors

3.2.1 Difficulty adapting to rural life and lack of a sense of belonging among teachers

According to data released by the Ministry of Education, as of the end of 2018, there were over 2.9 million rural teachers in China, of whom 58.3% were young teachers under the age of 40. With the implementation of the national special post plan, more and more fresh graduates have been going to remote schools with the joy of realizing their ideals and enthusiasm for their work. However, due to the changes in environment, relationships, and the difficulties of adapting to alien surroundings, many of these young teachers often feel a sense of discomfort, loneliness, and struggle to integrate into unfamiliar teams; as a result, they find it hard to be as invested in their work. In a survey of primary schools, it was found that half of the young female teachers were recent graduates who went through multiple rounds of interviews before being selected for their positions. These younger teachers required a long period of time to adjust to their new work and living environment. Many of their colleagues, who came to the job site at the same time as them, had already wanted to leave when they were still on the bus. Consequently, there has been a continuous flow of teachers who leave after 1-2 months of working and who are keen to take "teachers entering the city exams" in order to get a job in the city, provided they meet the examination requirements.

3.2.2 Excessive work pressure causing occupational burnout and teacher brain drain

The shortage of rural teachers often results in a teacher having to undertake multiple roles, putting them under significant work pressures. For example, a typical teacher in rural areas may need to simultaneously undertake teaching, head teacher, finance and logistical management duties. In our survey, a teacher named Xu who held multiple roles stated that she not only managed the students but also took responsibility for managing other teachers and even the aunts in the canteen. She joked that she was like a top that kept spinning around all day while taking home only one salary, and if she failed to meet the task requirements, she would be criticized by her superiors. Moreover, the lack of teaching resources in rural primary and secondary schools and limited opportunities for teachers to attend off-site training contributes further to the excessive workload of teachers. The lack of concern and support from their schools, coupled with the pressure of meeting the demands of their superiors, all contribute to a growing sense of occupational burnout.

3.2.3 Shortage of some emotional needs and constraints of personal and family life on teachers

In our research, we found that most of the rural teachers in County Y were women, and among women teachers, those aged between 20 to 30 years made up more than half. Many of these young female teachers either had established families or were currently in relationships. However, often, they are in long-distance relationships as their partners might be living in a different part of the country. They only meet their family members and partners for one or two times a month, usually on Friday afternoons, and then they return to school on Sunday after lunch. Some of the unmarried female teachers find it difficult to find suitable local partners, and often, during the matchmaking process, they

find it challenging to find local male partners, and mostly find partners from other parts of the country. This creates significant problems associated with relationships and family life. Based on such considerations of love and marriage, it is challenging for eligible female teachers to work in rural areas for an extended period. Teachers who already had families and children, they worry about their children's education, and so, they prefer to settle down in the cities. Most rural teachers are aware that the rural schools' education, infrastructure, and resources are not comparable to that of the urban schools, and, therefore, the vast majority of them choose to send their children to urban schools. For younger children, grandparents can take them to the central kindergarten. For slightly older children, they often go to boarding schools in county or city. Some rural teachers will try to transfer to the county or city, and teachers who cannot transfer will give up on rural teaching jobs and seek work in cities, with many of them buying houses in county or cities where they work. A significant proportion of middle-aged and young teachers quit their work due to the education of their children, which indicates the significant impact of children's education on teacher attrition.

4. Conclusion

The rural teacher resource is the talent guarantee for rural revitalization, and it is an important foundation for Yunnan to achieve sustainable development in economy, culture, and education. In the situation where the urban-rural difference will exist for a long time, it is difficult to attract and stabilize rural teachers according to the usual policies. Therefore, we should come up with solutions to solve the problem of "not being able to attract and retain" rural teachers. For example, local governments should implement rural teacher salary policies in accordance with laws and regulations to increase the salary of rural teachers. Through policy guidance and the promotion of model examples of rural teachers, we should correct people's wrong perceptions of rural teachers. Unnecessary regulations should be cancelled and rural teacher professional promotion channels should be unblocked. We should also make all rural teachers feel the respect and recognition from society towards their profession, and improve their occupational well-being. We should start from the construction of turnover dormitories for rural school teachers in remote and difficult areas, reasonable school work distribution, caring for and supporting teachers, and other aspects to alleviate the professional pressure of rural teachers, stimulate their work enthusiasm, attract them to come in, and retain them.

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