

# The Challenges and Solutions of Teachers' Professional Development in County Areas—A Survey of Teachers in Y County

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**Abstract:** Teachers in county areas serve as the cornerstone of local education, carrying the crucial responsibility of advancing the future of education. Given the distinctive context of county-level education, the professional development of teachers in these regions follows a logic that differs from that of their urban counterparts. This study thoroughly examines the underlying logic framework of teachers' professional development in county areas and, based on this analysis, presents a survey of teachers in Y County. The findings highlight several challenges faced by county teachers, including insufficient internal motivation for professional growth, limited time and resources for development, and the formalization of professional development training. To address these issues, the study proposes strategies to: inspire the intrinsic motivation of county teachers and enhance their self-development awareness; extend the time available for professional growth and create more opportunities for career advancement; and improve current training models to prioritize relevance and effectiveness.

**Keywords:** county education, teachers' professional development, logic framework, challenges

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the new era, China's social contradictions have undergone significant changes. The growing gap between the people's increasing demand for a better life and the unbalanced, insufficient development has become more pronounced. This contradiction is especially evident in education, as the public's call for high-quality education continues to grow. Education, a cornerstone of national policy, is crucial for the revitalization of the nation and social progress. County-level education, in particular, forms the foundation of China's education system, carrying the hopes of countless families. The development of teachers in county areas is a critical element in advancing high-quality education and addressing the issue of educational imbalance. The government has consistently prioritized the development of county teachers, introducing comprehensive policies to support rural education and promote the professional growth of teachers. In 2015, the *Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020)* was launched, offering a comprehensive blueprint for rural teacher development, aiming to ensure that teachers are able to "go to rural areas, stay there, and teach well," providing essential support for county education<sup>[1]</sup>. In 2018, the *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Teacher Teams in the New Era* and the *Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan (2018-2022)* were released, along with the 2019 *Notice on the Pilot Program for Chief Teacher Positions in Rural Schools of Central and Western China*, all aimed at offering targeted support for county teachers.

The challenges facing county teachers are not new. They have long been a focal point in both academic research and educational practice, accumulating substantial achievements in both theory and practice. However, the reality remains that

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county teachers still struggle with numerous issues, such as outdated professional knowledge, rigid teaching methods, and high levels of job burnout. To effectively meet the public's demand for high-quality education and ensure continued innovation in county education, it is crucial to adopt various strategies that thoroughly address the professional development challenges of county teachers. The high-quality development of these teachers will serve as a driving force for elevating county education to excellence, thus contributing to the delivery of education that meets the people's needs.

### **1. The current challenges in teachers' professional development in county areas**

This study was conducted in Y County, once a nationally designated poverty-stricken area. We randomly selected eight schools across various regions and educational stages in Y County for field surveys and interviews. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, of which 440 were returned, representing all teachers at the eight schools. After screening, questionnaires with fewer than five answers were discarded, resulting in nine invalid questionnaires. This left 431 valid responses, yielding a recovery rate of 95.7%. To ensure the scientific validity of the study, 16 teachers were selected for unstructured interviews. The findings revealed several significant challenges in the professional development of teachers in county areas.

#### **1.1 Insufficient intrinsic motivation for professional development**

Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal drive that encourages individuals to pursue self-development without external pressure<sup>[2]</sup>. A teacher's growth should be a process of "self-formation" rather than being shaped by external forces. The survey results show that 80% of teachers chose the profession out of passion, and over 61% strongly identify with the professionalism of the teaching role. However, only 27% of teachers have a clear career development plan. This suggests that although most teachers have a strong professional identity, they lack the motivation to actively pursue career development, with a weak sense of self-improvement. A deeper analysis identifies several contributing factors. The primary reason is the heavy workload faced by county teachers. In particular, teachers in boarding schools are not only responsible for demanding teaching duties but also handle extensive administrative tasks and even life guidance roles. This leaves little time or energy for professional growth. Moreover, there is a significant disparity between teachers' labor input and the rewards they receive. Some teachers, burdened by financial pressures, find it difficult to allocate time for personal development, while others, with lower salaries, lack the financial means to invest in self-improvement. Additionally, the development opportunities available to county teachers are limited. The relative isolation of county areas leads to a scarcity of resources, and the lack of effective development pathways further compounds the issue. Faced with a sharp contrast between their developmental needs and the limited resources available, many teachers feel overwhelmed, and their intrinsic motivation for professional growth gradually fades.

#### **1.2 The challenge of "limited time and opportunities" in professional development**

Teachers in county areas are facing a major challenge in their professional development, constrained by "limited time and opportunities." First, county teachers typically bear heavy teaching loads, and the shortage of staff exacerbates the difficulty in finding time for professional growth. In addition to lesson preparation and grading, they must also manage classrooms and offer student guidance, drastically reducing the time and energy available for personal development. Second, the opportunities for professional development are scarce. Due to geographic and resource limitations, county teachers often lack access to the same opportunities available to their urban counterparts. High-quality training programs, academic seminars, and teaching observation activities are typically concentrated in cities, and county teachers face obstacles such as inconvenient transportation and limited funding, making participation difficult. Moreover, county schools invest insufficiently in teachers' professional development, lacking the necessary facilities and resources to support research and innovation in teaching. For example, due to tight budgets, elementary schools in Y County are unable to provide the latest teaching equipment or software, restricting teachers' ability to refresh their teaching methods. Furthermore, county teachers face a dual imbalance in age and teaching structure. A significant proportion of teachers are aged 39 and above, contributing to an aging workforce that impedes both development and innovation. In addition, subjects like physical education, art, and music are often taught by teachers of other disciplines, and it is common for one

teacher to hold multiple roles. This practice not only increases teachers' workload but also limits their ability to specialize and deepen their expertise in their respective fields.

### **1.3 The formalization of professional development training**

Post-service training is a key pathway for the professional growth of county teachers and plays a critical role in shaping the local teaching workforce. However, feedback from interviews indicates that the effectiveness of current post-service training falls short of expectations. This is primarily due to the lack of practical components, the monotony of training resources, and an inadequate evaluation system. There are currently two main models for post-service training: the first is large-scale subject-specific training sessions, dominated by lectures. These sessions are often large in scale but feature low teacher participation. The content is poorly structured and tends to be superficial. Although well-known experts are invited to deliver lectures, teachers frequently report that the training does not address the local realities of their classrooms, leading to limited value and poor outcomes.<sup>[3]</sup> This one-size-fits-all approach fails to meet teachers' diverse learning needs, resulting in a lack of engagement and initiative during training. The second model involves school-based professional development within subject groups. However, due to the small number of teachers per subject, limited compatibility, and heavy teaching responsibilities, combined with a lack of guidance, facilities, and funding, these sessions are often seen as formalities, with little real value for either the school or the teachers. The survey further reveals that more than 70% of teachers feel the practical elements of post-service training are severely lacking, preventing them from translating theoretical knowledge into effective teaching practice. Furthermore, 85% of teachers report that training resources are overly simplistic, relying too heavily on traditional lectures and reports, with little variety in training methods or resources. This failure to offer diversified options makes it difficult to meet the varied needs of teachers. Finally, the current assessment and evaluation mechanisms are overly simplistic, focusing mainly on attendance and basic feedback forms, while neglecting to track or assess actual improvements in teaching practices<sup>[4]</sup>. This narrow approach to evaluation makes it difficult to measure the effectiveness of the training and hinders ongoing improvement.

## **2. The logical framework of professional development for teachers in county areas**

Counties, as a vital part of China's administrative structure, sit at the critical intersection of urban and rural areas, possessing distinctive geographical and socio-cultural features. From its origins in the Spring and Autumn period, through its adoption in the Warring States, and formalization in the Qin Dynasty, the county system has evolved over thousands of years, remaining a foundational local administrative unit<sup>[5]</sup>. In academic studies, the term "county area" refers to administrative divisions under the jurisdiction of a prefecture-level city or district, including both counties and county-level cities, with rural areas as the main demographic. These areas are characterized by relatively lower levels of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. According to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, a "field" is a network of relationships or a structure formed by different positions<sup>[6]</sup>. As a unique field, county areas nurture strong local cultures and create tightly-knit cultural networks<sup>[7]</sup>. Teachers working in these areas live within this environment, and their professional development follows a trajectory that, while sharing commonalities with urban teachers, is distinctly shaped by rural contexts, exhibiting notable characteristics of "local adaptability" and "community cohesion."

### **2.1 Internal drive: The intrinsic motivation behind the professional development of teachers in county areas**

Teachers in county areas are deeply embedded in their local communities and bear the responsibility of preserving and passing on local knowledge. Their professional development is uniquely influenced by cultural imprints and driven by strong intrinsic motivation. This internal drive originates from their deep emotional connection to their hometowns and a sense of duty, compelling them to seek innovative methods in their teaching. Faced with the simplicity and unique life experiences of rural students, teachers in these areas must possess the ability to adapt their teaching to meet the diverse needs of their students. They need to be skilled at identifying educational opportunities within the context of rural life, using local resources such as agricultural knowledge and traditional craftsmanship to craft engaging and meaningful lessons. This approach helps make knowledge come alive and more relatable, sparking students' interest and unlocking

their potential. However, the long-standing trend toward urbanization in teacher training has often overlooked the rural context, leaving county teachers to confront many challenges in their teaching practice<sup>[8]</sup>. To overcome this, county teachers must actively immerse themselves in local life and enhance their cultural adaptability. This requires not only solid professional expertise and teaching skills but also a deep understanding of rural culture, the social environment, and educational needs. Teachers should closely align their professional development with the realities of their rural contexts. In this process, intrinsic motivation plays a pivotal role in their professional growth. This motivation arises from teachers' passion for education and their unwavering commitment to self-improvement, reflected in their strong desire for personal growth and continual effort. County teachers should engage in lifelong learning, reflection, and practice to enhance their professional competencies and teaching abilities, contributing to the development of rural students. Simultaneously, they should actively participate in the construction and preservation of local culture, merging educational expertise with rural traditions to drive the advancement of education in county areas.

## **2.2 External empowerment: Building a support ladder for teacher development in rural areas**

Given the unique geographic and social conditions in rural regions, teachers in these areas face more significant challenges in professional development than their urban peers. Factors such as limited access to information, scarce development opportunities, and a lack of resources create significant challenges for rural teachers in accessing professional development, updating educational philosophies, and mastering advanced teaching methods. In the diverse landscape of educational development, external empowerment has emerged as a critical driving force for the professional growth of rural teachers. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural teachers have a more urgent and distinct need for external support. Urban teachers generally benefit from a wealth of professional development resources, including advanced training, academic conferences, and high-quality educational resource libraries, all of which significantly support their professional growth. In contrast, rural teachers lack these conditions and require more external intervention and support to overcome information barriers and improve their professional skills. This intervention and support not only supplement and provide resources for the professional development of rural teachers but also focus on fundamentally improving their professional development ecosystem by creating effective mechanisms and platforms. Government, schools, and society must collaborate to provide more professional development opportunities and resources for rural teachers, such as establishing special funds to support teacher training, creating exchange mechanisms between rural and urban teachers, and introducing online education platforms. Only through the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders can rural teachers receive more resource support, institutional safeguards, and platform development, ultimately fostering their professional growth and driving the sustainable and healthy development of education in rural areas.

## **2.3 System integration: A closed-loop mechanism for the ongoing development of rural teachers**

In the rural educational ecosystem, teacher development is characterized by a strong sense of community cohesion. Rural areas feature a compact geography, where teachers' workplaces are centralized and close to one another, facilitating frequent communication and interaction. In contrast to urban teachers, rural teachers face more similar educational challenges. This shared experience creates a strong sense of internal cohesion, encouraging them to seek support within their community and foster close-knit relationships<sup>[9]</sup>. This community cohesion offers rural teachers unique advantages for professional development, though it also presents certain challenges. To fully harness the positive impact of community cohesion and foster the continuous development of rural teachers, it is essential to integrate systems and create a sustainable closed-loop mechanism. This mechanism seeks to integrate diverse educational resources, training opportunities, and exchange platforms within rural areas, forming a comprehensive, efficient, and collaborative teacher development system. The system encompasses several key components, including goal-setting, planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement. These elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a closed-loop cycle that collectively drives the professional growth of rural teachers. Specifically, goal setting should closely reflect the realities of rural education, balancing both long-term and short-term objectives while being forward-thinking

and personalized, thus creating a tailored growth path for teachers. The planning phase should break down goals into specific, actionable plans—such as training, research, and communication—while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt to changes. Implementation, as the core component, should involve carefully organizing diverse activities and strictly managing the process to ensure the effective execution of the plans. The evaluation and feedback phase should regularly assess teachers’ professional development, offering precise and timely feedback to guide them in identifying areas for improvement. The continuous improvement phase should continuously refine the entire system based on evaluation results, enhancing its operational efficiency and consistently driving the professional growth of rural teachers.

### **3. Strategies for addressing the challenges in the professional development of rural teachers**

In response to the difficulties rural teachers face in their professional development, and considering the unique framework of rural teacher development, the following strategies are proposed:

#### **3.1 Stimulating internal motivation and strengthening self-development awareness**

At present, administrative power plays a leading role in China’s teacher development process, creating an “external” driven model reliant on policy and training systems. In this model, rural teachers often find themselves in a passive position, merely participating in training and development activities without fully activating their own initiative. Research shows that many rural teachers lack a comprehensive and deep understanding of their own professional development. They focus narrowly on improving teaching skills, falling into a utilitarian mindset<sup>[10]</sup>. This narrow view of development leads to a weak awareness of actively seeking growth, with many teachers adopting a mindset of “waiting” for directives from superiors, “relying” on external support, and “demanding” resources, making it difficult to achieve personal growth breakthroughs. For rural teachers to break this deadlock and shift from passive to active participants, the key is to return the focus to the teachers themselves, following a development trajectory from “internal” to “external,” and promoting “self-driven” growth. This requires returning control of teacher development to the teachers themselves, enabling them to become the initiators and drivers of their own growth. Moreover, building on the foundation of “self-driven” growth, it is crucial to cultivate teachers’ “consciousness” of self-development. This self-awareness, at the core of their professional growth, is rooted in daily self-reflection and profoundly influences teachers’ professional attitudes, commitment, and behaviors in their teaching practice. This awareness involves a comprehensive reflection on teachers’ entire career paths. The development of rural teachers can only move forward by addressing the root of this awareness and actively fostering self-development consciousness. This will prevent teachers from falling into the trap of weak reflection and stagnant growth, enabling them to embark on a journey of continuous improvement.

#### **3.2 Increasing development time and expanding opportunities for professional growth**

Rural teachers’ professional development is currently hindered by the dual challenges of “limited time and few opportunities,” which severely restricts educational quality and teacher growth. A multifaceted approach is urgently needed to address these issues. First, strengthening mechanisms for teacher recruitment and replenishment is essential. Local education authorities should conduct thorough assessments of teacher shortages in rural areas, planning according to subject and age. On one hand, they should broaden recruitment efforts to attract talent, while on the other, they should strengthen collaboration with universities to implement targeted teacher training programs and special teaching posts, infusing vitality into remote and underperforming schools, optimizing teacher-student ratios, and creating a dynamic reserve of substitute, retired, or aspiring teachers. This reserve can be mobilized in emergencies to free up professional development time for current teachers. Secondly, optimizing the teacher mobility system is a crucial step. Local education authorities should establish platforms for urban-rural teacher exchanges and introduce incentive policies to encourage urban teaching leaders to support rural areas. This can be achieved through demonstration lessons, lectures, and mentor-mentee pairings that convey cutting-edge educational concepts. In turn, rural teachers should be given opportunities to undertake on-the-job learning in urban schools for periods ranging from one semester to a year, with a mutual exchange of knowledge and experience upon their return. Additionally, rural education departments need to break down inter-school barriers, coordinate teaching resources, and arrange for specialist teachers in subjects such as music,

physical education, and the arts to provide cross-school instruction. This will improve teaching efficiency and allow teachers to focus more on their own professional development. Furthermore, enhancing salary and benefits, as well as the appeal of development platforms, is crucial. Local governments should assume responsibility for funding by offering special subsidies to provide extra allowances for teachers in remote or high-demand areas. A dynamic salary increase mechanism should be established, with adjustments based on years of service, professional titles, and accomplishments, to attract and retain talent<sup>[11]</sup>. Schools and education authorities should collaborate to build an ecosystem for development, increasing investment in infrastructure such as laboratories and multimedia classrooms. They should also organize activities such as teaching competitions, research projects, and academic salons to stimulate intrinsic motivation and expand growth opportunities. This comprehensive approach will remove obstacles to the professional development of rural teachers and propel rural education toward high-quality outcomes.

### **3.3 Improving training models to enhance the effectiveness of professional development**

Post-service training for rural teachers plays a vital role in their professional growth but is currently hindered by significant challenges that require urgent improvement. First and foremost, tailoring training content to specific needs is critical. Training should align with the professional standards for teachers in the new era, focusing on key areas such as educational philosophy, teaching skills, and teacher ethics. This will guide training toward greater professionalism and standardization, ensuring rural teachers grow in step with modern educational trends. Additionally, a thorough needs assessment is necessary. Before training, professional teams should visit rural schools to conduct surveys, observations, and interviews to identify teaching difficulties and skill gaps. The training should move beyond simply copying urban models; instead, it should be designed to fit the unique conditions of rural areas—such as the characteristics of rural students and limited resources—by creating highly practical, tailored courses<sup>[12]</sup>. Second, strengthening the oversight and incentivization of training effectiveness is indispensable. A rigorous monitoring system should be established, utilizing information technology tools for the entire process—from planning reviews and real-time tracking to outcome evaluation. This will prevent superficial training experiences and ensure teachers receive adequate and effective learning time. Additionally, a diversified incentive system should be introduced. Teachers who actively participate in training should be awarded honor certificates to enhance their professional pride. Teachers with excellent training outcomes or significant practical achievements should receive bonuses or subsidies for purchasing equipment, thus motivating them to engage more deeply in professional development. Third, it is urgent to innovate the selection mechanism for training participants. The dominance of key teachers and renowned experts should be challenged by establishing a more flexible system that takes into account factors such as teaching experience, subject, and performance to allocate training opportunities more fairly. This will ensure that even ordinary teachers with specific needs receive regular, formal training. Additionally, based on growth trajectories and training feedback, the participant structure should be optimized to ensure a balanced distribution of training resources, enabling the development of a more evenly distributed teacher workforce in rural areas. This will reshape the training ecosystem, invigorate the development of rural education, and empower rural teachers to achieve new levels of professional growth.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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