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Current Challenges and Strategies for Improving Rural Teachers' Curriculum Development Capabilities: Based on Empirical Research Across Multiple Locations

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The curriculum development capabilities of rural teachers serve not only as a core measure of their professional competence but also as a key catalyst for curriculum reform. Based on large-scale empirical research, this study identifies several core challenges in developing rural teachers' curriculum development capabilities, including a narrow understanding of curriculum value, inadequate integration of curriculum resources, rigid curriculum evaluation methods, subjective decision-making regarding curriculum, and inflexible forms of curriculum organization. To enhance rural teachers' curriculum development capabilities, it is essential to foster a culture of lifelong learning among them, enabling them to engage in curriculum development proactively; emphasize locally grounded research to develop curricula rooted in the local context; strengthen the decision-making awareness of the rural teaching community and establish democratic decision-making mechanisms; improve incentive and reward systems for rural teachers to stimulate their intrinsic motivation; and expand training opportunities for rural teachers to update their curriculum-related knowledge and skills.

Keywords: rural teachers, curriculum development, curriculum development competencies

Introduction

The curriculum development competence of rural teachers is a key indicator of their professional quality and an important driver of their professional development in the new era. To identify the core challenges currently facing rural teachers' curriculum development competence, this study conducted a large-scale empirical survey. Using the grounded theory approach, this study identified eight dimensions of rural teachers' curriculum development capabilities: curriculum comprehension, curriculum planning, curriculum organization, curriculum integration, curriculum assessment, curriculum decision-making, curriculum research, and curriculum reflection. Based on these dimensions, a questionnaire and interview guide were developed, and field research was conducted.

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Existing Challenges in Rural Teachers' Curriculum Development Capabilities

Narrow Understanding of Curriculum Value

The survey revealed that rural teachers have a narrow understanding of curriculum value, which manifests in the following two aspects: First, rural teachers have a one-sided understanding of the educational value of the curriculum. While most rural teachers possess a strong sense of attachment to their hometowns and a deep commitment to education, they place excessive emphasis on the instrumental and utilitarian aspects of the curriculum, thereby undermining its educational orientation. Second, rural teachers have a limited understanding of the knowledge value of the curriculum. Most teachers place great emphasis on curricular knowledge and highly value the authority of knowledge; they view curricular knowledge as synonymous with textbook content. When teaching curricular knowledge, they follow the curriculum standards and textbook content step by step, and they also rely on these standards and textbooks when selecting curriculum content.

Inadequate Integration of Curriculum Resources

The survey revealed significant shortcomings in teachers' integration of curriculum resources: First, teachers encounter obstacles in selecting and reorganizing curriculum resources; faced with a vast array of options, they are unsure how to choose and synthesize them. Second, teachers' ability to utilize technology for applying curriculum resources is relatively weak; against the backdrop of constantly evolving technology and resources, it is challenging for rural teachers to leverage new technologies to integrate new resources.

Rigid Curriculum Assessment Methods

The survey revealed that current rural teachers' curriculum assessment methods are relatively rigid. Assessment primarily relies on traditional question-and-answer-style testing, mainly through homework and in-class exercises. Furthermore, some teachers place excessive emphasis on knowledge acquisition and college entrance when evaluating students, neglecting assessments of students' intrinsic development and behavioral changes. In short, assessments focus on summative evaluation, lacking formative and value-added assessments.

Subjective Curriculum Decision-Making

The survey found that rural teachers' curriculum decision-making is subjective, as evidenced by the following three aspects: First, teachers exhibit subjective biases in the curriculum decision-making process. Whether at the instructional or curricular level, or in the process of creating learning environments and guiding students' academic and daily lives, the teacher acts as the sole decision-maker. Second, teachers lack objective standards in the curriculum decision-making process. Whether in classroom instruction or school life, there are no objective criteria or standards against which to measure teacher behavior; teachers' decision-making is largely not guided by objective criteria.

Rigid Forms of Curriculum Organization

The survey found that rural teachers' forms of curriculum organization are rigid, primarily manifested in the following three aspects: First, teachers' methods of curriculum organization are simplistic, and they lack the use of modern educational technology. Rural teachers have extensive teaching experience and strong curriculum organization skills, but they fail to utilize modern teaching resources in the actual organizational process. Second, teachers' curriculum organization processes are formulaic, relying primarily on traditional organizational forms; these traditional processes are deeply ingrained and lack innovation. Third, teachers' philosophies regarding

curriculum organization are outdated; when organizing curriculum activities, they focus on the organizational form while neglecting to inspire and guide students throughout the entire process.

Strategies for Enhancing Rural Teachers' Curriculum Development Capabilities

Based on the actual circumstances of rural teacher development, research suggests that the following five approaches can effectively enhance rural teachers' curriculum development capabilities.

Fostering a Culture of Lifelong Learning Among Rural Teachers to Promote Conscious Curriculum Development

Teachers' educational philosophies and concepts determine the future direction of their professional development. To help teachers embrace a culture of lifelong learning, enhance their professional competence, and foster conscious curriculum development, the following two approaches can be adopted:

First, fully understand the value of curricular knowledge and deeply explore the educational value of the curriculum. On the one hand, teachers must fully understand the value of curricular knowledge and construct their own perspectives on curriculum and knowledge. On the other hand, teachers must deeply explore the educational value of the curriculum to promote high-quality development in rural education.

Second, teachers must deeply study local ethnic cultures to strengthen their sense of mission in curriculum development in ethnic regions. On the one hand, teachers should deeply study local ethnic cultures to enhance their ethnic cultural identity. On the other hand, they should integrate ethnic cultural curriculum resources to foster ethnic cultural awareness. Furthermore, they should disseminate and innovate ethnic cultures to boost ethnic cultural confidence.

Emphasizing Localized Research by Rural Teachers and Developing Curricula Rooted in the Local Context

Rural teachers' capacity for context-based research determines the direction of curriculum development. To enhance this capacity and ensure that curriculum development is firmly rooted in the local context, the following two approaches can be adopted:

First, rural teachers should conduct research that incorporates the region's distinctive cultural characteristics. Rural areas are home to a rich, diverse, and uniquely charming cultural heritage, such as distinctive languages and scripts, traditional art forms, folk activities, and religious beliefs. Rural teachers can draw upon these regional cultural characteristics to enrich their research materials.

Second, rural teachers should conduct research based on real-world local issues. On the one hand, addressing the challenges and needs associated with these issues can strengthen their motivation for research. On the other hand, drawing on experiential materials related to these issues can enrich their research data. Furthermore, developing strategies to address these issues can help establish research models.

Strengthening Decision-Making Awareness Among Rural Teachers and Establishing a Democratic Decision-Making Mechanism

Teachers' professional development and the quality of their decision-making directly impact the quality of instruction and student growth. To enhance the objectivity and scientific rigor of decision-making, the following two approaches can be taken:

First, explore a collaborative teaching and research mechanism involving multiple stakeholders. Schools should take the lead in establishing a teacher research community that integrates curriculum research, curriculum services, curriculum guidance, teacher training, and the promotion of innovation. On the one hand, teachers from different disciplines, with varying years of experience, and from diverse ethnic backgrounds should be invited to join the research community. On the other hand, education experts and scholars should be invited to serve as external advisors and regularly participate in the community's discussion activities.

Second, standardize the democratic decision-making process for curriculum matters. On the one hand, establish decision-making procedures based on evidence-based research (Wu, Song, & Xu, 2023). Before discussing decision-making matters such as teaching plans and curriculum design, teachers must collect relevant data. On the other hand, implement a collective deliberation system. Within the teaching and research community, regarding important decision-making matters, every member has an equal opportunity to speak, and the final decision is then determined through voting or by reaching a consensus, ensuring the democratic and objective nature of the decision-making process.

Improve the Incentive Mechanism for Rural Teachers to Stimulate Their Intrinsic Motivation

To stimulate teachers' intrinsic motivation in curriculum development and make curriculum research and innovation an intrinsic need for teachers, schools should improve their teacher incentive mechanisms to ensure fairness and transparency in the rewards system. This can be achieved by focusing on the following three areas:

First, refine the criteria for rewarding research achievements. In addition to traditional achievements such as published papers and approved research projects, include teachers' contributions in areas such as research on teaching methods for the preservation and innovation of ethnic culture, as well as the development of school-based ethnic education curricula, within the scope of rewards.

Second, establish a support system for the research process. Schools should not only set up curriculum research funds to provide financial support for teachers' research projects—including expenses for field research, the purchase of materials, and the acquisition of experimental equipment—but also ensure that reward formats are diversified and dynamically adjusted (Zhuang & Chu, 2020). In addition to traditional forms of recognition such as cash bonuses and certificates of honor, schools should introduce rewards closely tied to teachers' professional development.

Enhancing Curriculum Training Opportunities for Rural Teachers to Update Their Knowledge and Skills

Targeted training to strengthen rural teachers' curriculum development capabilities is a key measure for promoting the updating of teachers' knowledge and skills. This can be approached from three aspects:

First, innovate training organization formats. Adopt a blended online-offline training model and implement a curriculum training model guided by "problems, practice, and outcomes."

Second, optimize training on the integration of curriculum resources. Develop specialized training courses on curriculum resource integration, with content covering methods for integrating ethnic cultural resources, locally distinctive resources, and national curriculum standards, and instructing teachers on how to select, adapt, and innovate curriculum resources (Fu, 2019).

Third, strengthen the connection between pre-service and in-service training in ethnic culture and information technology. Within the pre-service education curriculum system at teacher training colleges, add

course modules that integrate ethnic culture and information technology; for in-service teachers, design tiered and categorized training programs in ethnic culture and information technology.

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