

The Current State of Role Conflict Among Rural Teachers: Causes, Impacts, and Coping Strategies

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Abstract: Currently, rural teachers are facing multiple role conflicts, including the social role conflict of being an insider versus an outsider, the professional role conflict of being an educator versus an administrator, and the community role conflict of being a “teacher” versus a “guardian.” Exploring the current state of these conflicts, clarifying their specific manifestations, causes, and countermeasures, is of significant practical importance for enhancing rural teachers’ professional identity, promoting their professional development, and modernizing rural education.

Keywords: Rural teachers; Role conflicts; Rural education development

Introduction

Promoting the professional development of rural teachers and strengthening the construction of the rural teaching workforce is crucial for the development of rural basic education and the educational enterprise of our country. In the process of advancing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, the dual transformation of social contradictions and educational issues has made the role conflicts of rural teachers increasingly prominent. This has become a new factor affecting the construction of the rural teaching workforce. By analyzing the role conflicts exhibited by rural teachers in their teaching activities, this study aims to clarify their underlying causes and propose effective ways to alleviate these conflicts. This is of great practical significance for improving rural teachers' understanding of their roles, stabilizing the rural teaching workforce, and promoting the modernization of rural education.

1. Specific Manifestations of Role Conflicts Among Rural Teachers

"Roles" and "role conflicts" are important concepts in sociology. Role conflict refers to the inner or emotional contradictions and conflicts that arise when an individual cannot meet the multiple expectations of a single role, or when an individual simultaneously plays several roles that have conflicting duties, rights, and norms. Rural teachers, as key agents, often need to play several important roles.^[1] Due to the unique nature of their work environment, teachers take on various roles. When facing multiple role relationships, rural teachers inevitably experience situations where they cannot effectively adjust to these roles. As a result, contradictions and conflicts arise, making it difficult for them to effectively perform their roles. In their work, the role conflicts of rural teachers mainly manifest in three aspects: social role conflicts, professional role conflicts, and community role conflicts.

1.1 Insiders vs. Outsiders: Social Role Conflicts of Rural Teachers

Since the establishment of modern education systems, rural tutors have generally been local teachers from their own villages.^[2] They not only play the role of intellectuals in rural society but also have a deep understanding of local customs and are familiar with folk etiquette, fitting well into rural culture. Rural teachers are born in the countryside, live in the countryside, and work in the field of rural education, making them insiders deeply rooted in the rural context. However, rural teachers are gradually becoming "migrants" between urban and rural areas. Most rural teachers adopt a "commuting" lifestyle, where they work in rural areas during weekdays and return to county towns or cities during non-working days. This lifestyle pattern shifts rural teachers' living environment from closed to open, leading to a disconnection with the surrounding rural society, thus gradually making rural teachers outsiders or marginalized individuals within the rural community.

1.2 Educator vs. Administrator: Professional Role Conflicts of Rural Teachers

Usually, the main work of rural teachers should focus on teaching, including lesson preparation, teaching, and grading tasks. However, in actual work, rural teachers often face role conflicts between "educators" and "administrators." On one hand, rural teachers have a heavy teaching workload. The teaching tasks of rural teachers usually involve teaching multiple subjects and grades because rural schools

have relatively few students, making it difficult to support specialized educational settings. At the same time, they also need to fulfill administrative duties such as student management and implementation of education policies, which conflict with their teaching tasks. Survey data shows that the average weekly teaching hours of rural teachers are 17.35 periods, the average number of subjects taught by rural teachers is 2.65, and the average number of classes taught by rural teachers is 2.08, with as many as 41.76% of teachers needing to teach across grades.^[3]

1.3 Educators vs. Guardians: Community Role Conflicts of Rural Teachers

As educators, rural teachers' main task is to guide students' learning and development. The role of guardians emphasizes the role of rural teachers in students' daily lives, becoming guardians in the process of students' growth.

As urbanization advances, the influx of rural youth and adults into cities for work has led to the problem of left-behind children in rural areas. The long-term lack of family education and the rupture of affection for left-behind children can directly lead to emotional disturbances and further reinforce negative experiences and incorrect values, even internalizing into stable personality defects.^[4] To ensure the psychological health development of left-behind children, rural teachers need to expand their roles. In addition to serving as "educators" for students, they also need to act as "guardians" for left-behind children. When schools have dual expectations of rural teachers but struggle to balance these two roles, rural teachers may fall into role conflicts between being "educators" and "guardians."

2. Analysis of the Causes of Role Conflicts Among Rural Teachers

The role conflict issues faced by rural teachers in the educational process are quite diverse and complex. Therefore, it is necessary to thoroughly study the fundamental reasons for these role conflicts from multiple perspectives. Based on the analysis above, the root causes of role conflicts for rural teachers can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the institutional segregation of rural teachers' professional identities while their daily lives are affected by urbanization. Secondly, unreasonable teacher allocation combined with the ambiguous relationship between "government-school" responsibilities. Finally, the weakening of family education functions and the continuous expansion of school functions. These factors collectively contribute to the emergence of role conflicts for rural teachers.

2.1 Institutional Segregation of Rural Teachers' Identities and Urbanization of Daily Life

The nationalization of rural teacher identities continuously receives care and nourishment within the national system, responsible for completing their functions as part of the national cultural machinery within the school walls, but simultaneously drifting away from the intrinsic connection with rural communities beyond the walls.^[5] This segregation results in the diminishing of rural teachers' "local" nature in local society, deepening the role conflicts between their role as "insiders" in rural education and as "outsiders" in social life.

Simultaneously, the trend of urbanization in daily life exacerbates the marginalization of rural teachers. With the continuous advancement of urbanization, compared to rural areas, cities are more desirable living areas for modern people due to their superior economic, social, and cultural conditions.^[6] Rural teachers aspire to enter more developed urban life, leading them to make decisions to work in rural education while choosing to live in cities, thus becoming "wanderers" between urban and rural areas.

2.2 Unreasonable Teacher Allocation and Unclear "Government-School" Responsibilities

The teacher allocation based on the "student-teacher ratio" is incompatible with the actual operation of small-scale rural schools, and some counties in central and western China, due to financial difficulties, choose to reduce school staffing, resulting in even tighter staffing in small-scale schools.^[7] Due to insufficient staffing, the number of teachers in rural schools is limited, resulting in the inability to reasonably distribute educational and teaching work, and teachers undertake heavy teaching tasks. In addition to teaching burdens, rural teachers face heavy administrative workloads, which is also an important reason for exacerbating their role conflicts.

In rural schools, due to the unclear relationship between the government and the school, rural teachers usually need to shoulder a large amount of administrative work. This ambiguity mainly manifests in the imbalance and unclear distribution of power and responsibility between the government and the school. In practical work, when some tasks conflict with normal teaching work, teachers may even be encouraged to adjust normal educational work to complete assigned tasks.^[8] This phenomenon further exacerbates the conflict between rural teachers' teaching and administrative work.

2.3 Weakening of Family Education Functions and Expansion of School Responsibilities

With the deepening of urbanization, on the one hand, there is rapid economic development and massive population mobility, while on the other hand, the influx of a large number of rural youth and adults into cities has also changed the traditional rural social and family structures, leading to a serious phenomenon of "hollowing out" in rural areas.^[9] The existence of a large number of left-behind children has become an issue that cannot be ignored in social and educational development. The weakening of family education functions shifts the parental education role, originally belonging to the family, to others.

On the other hand, with the changes in family education responsibilities and the continuous increase in social expectations for school education, traditional schools alone cannot meet the real needs. Therefore, rural schools must expand non-educational functions. The professional role of rural teachers is no longer limited to traditional educational categories but requires them to undertake more complex and extensive job responsibilities. In this process, the role of rural teachers as guardians of rural youth becomes more apparent.

3. Strategies for Resolving Role Conflicts Among Rural Teachers

3.1 Promoting Interaction Among Rural Teachers and Advancing Integrated Urban-Rural Development

It is necessary to accelerate the process of urban-rural integration to encourage rural teachers to delve into their local culture, allowing them to integrate more closely with the local community. Thoroughly implement the rural revitalization strategy, promote rural revitalization in terms of industry, talent, culture, ecology, and organization through scientific means, and strive to shape beautiful rural areas with prosperous industries, livable ecology, civilized communities, effective governance, and affluent lives. Further coordinating urban and rural development and advancing the process of urban-rural integration will enhance the attractiveness of rural areas in various fields such as employment, living, and education, thereby reshaping the social ecology of rural areas.^[10] This will accelerate rural modernization and provide more livable conditions for rural teachers, along with policy support conducive to the education of their children, encouraging rural teachers to actively immerse themselves in rural life. This, in turn, will help effectively resolve conflicts between their internal and external roles.

3.2 Increasing Teacher Supply and Clarifying the Relationship Between Administrative Departments and Schools

Firstly, increasing the supply of rural teachers by balancing the allocation of teaching staff in rural schools can effectively reduce the workload of rural teachers. Due to the shortage of full-time teachers in rural schools, teachers have a heavy workload in teaching. Therefore, various measures should be taken to increase the supply of teacher resources to ensure that rural schools have sufficient teacher resources. Increasing the number of rural teachers ensures that their respective responsibilities are fully fulfilled. Rural schools should actively attract more full-time teachers with complementary expertise in subject areas and provide corresponding policy support.

Secondly, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between administrative departments and rural schools, defining the responsibilities between local administrative departments and rural schools to alleviate the administrative workload of rural teachers. This goal can be achieved by regulating the task assignment behavior of administrative departments, ensuring that rural teachers can better focus on core educational work.

3.3 Strengthening the Role of Family Education and Clarifying School Responsibilities Boundaries

On one hand, we should emphasize the importance of family education, encouraging parents to fulfill their educational responsibilities, which can better leverage the role of rural teachers.

On the other hand, it is necessary to clarify the responsibilities of schools to ensure that rural teachers can refocus their work on education and teaching. By clearly defining the responsibilities of rural schools, we can prevent the excessive expansion of the role of rural teachers. Ambiguous school responsibilities often lead to rural teachers being viewed as "guardians," increasing their workload and role conflicts. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly define the responsibilities of rural schools to effectively control the "guardianship" work of rural teachers, enabling them to better focus on teaching work and fulfill their teaching responsibilities.

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