

The Path to Enhancement of Rural Teachers' Professional Happiness in County Areas—Based on ERG Theory Perspective

Chuanyi Xu, Xiaoyu Wang

College of Education, China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 637009, China
xuabcc0423@163.com

Keywords: Rural teachers, professional well-being, ERG theory

Abstract: Rural teachers are the cornerstone for promoting the high-quality development of rural education, an important force for rural revitalization, and the mainstay of grassroots education. However, studies have shown that rural teachers' professional happiness is low and their sense of retention is weak. Therefore, based on the ERG theory perspective, the path to improve the professional happiness of rural teachers in the county is elaborated in view of this status quo. Based on the ERG theory, the needs of rural teachers are divided into three levels, namely, survival needs, relationship needs and growth needs, and it is discussed that the government, the school and the society should work together and take a series of measures to meet these needs to enhance the professional happiness of rural teachers, provide all-around support and help for rural teachers, and promote the healthy development of rural education.

1. Introduction

The comprehensive implementation of General Secretary's important remarks on education and the further modernization of education in China require that the development of rural education be taken as a foundation. The Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on the Implementation of the Strategy of Rural Revitalization also mention "giving priority to the development of rural education", "attaching great importance to the development of compulsory education in rural areas", and "building a good team of rural teachers" as important elements. "As an important element. Rural education is an integral part of rural society, and rural teachers are the main body of rural education, determining the quality and level of rural education, and playing a pivotal role in the inheritance and innovation of rural culture as well as the healthy growth of rural children.^[1] Rural teachers train generations of rural students, provide an important guarantee for the human resource reserve and economic and social development of rural areas, promote the upgrading and development of rural industries, and further narrow the urban-rural gap. And professional happiness is an important evaluation index of rural teachers' retention, which is the motivation for rural teachers to stick to their positions. Teachers' sense of professional happiness is a more stable emotional experience dominated by positive experience that accompanies teachers' awareness and evaluation of their profession, educational and teaching

activities and benefits of practice.^[2] Rural teachers are the cornerstone of education in rural areas, and their professional well-being directly affects the quality of education and the development of students; a lower sense of professional well-being will cause rural teachers to lose their motivation and affect teaching results. The enhancement of rural teachers' professional happiness will help to improve the level of rural education and inject new vitality into the educational cause of the county. Therefore, based on the ERG theory perspective, this paper explores the improvement path of rural teachers' professional happiness.

1.1 Factors affecting the professional well-being of rural teachers

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, American humanistic psychologist Clayton O'Deaver proposed the theory of Existence Relationship Growth (hereinafter referred to as the ERG theory)^[3]. The ERG theory is a fulfillment theory used to explain human needs and motivations, which divides human needs into three levels, namely Existence (survival needs), Relatedness (relationship needs) and Growth, which can co-exist and interact with each other. ERG theory emphasizes the interaction and dynamics of the different levels of needs, i.e., after satisfying one level of needs, an individual may move to satisfy other levels of needs. In addition, ERG theory suggests that in some cases individuals may experience "regression", i.e., refocusing and re-emphasizing lower-level needs when they are unable to satisfy higher-level needs.

1.1.1 Survival needs

Survival needs are the lowest level of people's needs. Survival needs are the most basic needs of human beings and form the basis for other needs, and this need includes the physiological needs of human beings as well as their material survival needs, such as food, water, shelter and medical care. The survival needs of rural teachers also include basic material survival needs and survival security, but may have some unique characteristics and challenges in the specific environment of the countryside. First, in terms of sources of income, rural teachers need a stable source of income to meet their daily living needs, including expenses for food, housing, and medical care. However, due to the backward economic conditions and poor living conditions in villages, rural teachers may have relatively low salary levels and may face difficulties in meeting their basic living needs with less income. Secondly, in terms of working conditions and living environment, rural teachers need good working conditions and living environment to ensure their survival and health, including a comfortable teaching environment, safe housing conditions and infrastructure. However, some rural areas have long and difficult commuting times due to poor natural conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and the treacherous geographical location of schools, which pose greater safety risks. With the development of urbanization, "the work-life dualization of rural teachers within the county has become a new trend."^[4] "Migratory bird" rural teachers migrate back and forth between the countryside and the towns, lacking a sense of belonging to the countryside. Thirdly, in terms of health and medical protection, rural teachers need basic medical protection and health services to ensure their health and safety. Due to the limited size of existing rural schools, the structural shortage of teachers in subjects such as music, physical education and aesthetics always exists. A rural teacher often undertakes the task of teaching multiple subjects, and rural teachers need to work hard, and the increased workload and labor intensity have a direct impact on the physical health of teachers.^[5] Finally, in terms of social security and welfare protection, rural teachers need to be provided with social security and welfare protection to cope with unforeseen events and difficulties in life, including social insurance, pension insurance, unemployment insurance, and other aspects of protection. However, in rural areas, due to poorer economic conditions and insufficient government investment, social security and welfare protection for rural teachers may be inadequate when

compared with urban welfare. As a result, in many rural schools, it is difficult to meet the survival needs of rural teachers, especially for young teachers, the mainstay of the rural teaching force, who have a higher level of both material and spiritual pursuits. The houses, equipments, salaries and safety of rural schools are far inferior to those of urban schools, which greatly reduces the professional happiness of rural teachers. Therefore, the need for survival is the main factor affecting the source of rural teachers' professional happiness.

1.1.2 Relationship needs

Relationship needs include the needs for social relationship, sense of belonging and friendship between people and others. People are eager to be recognized and understood in the society, and eager to establish contact and relationship with others. Identity is the affirmative answer to "who am I", which is the logical foundation of the whole teacher development, and it is also the primary issue of the development of rural teachers in China nowadays.^[6] This social need is of great significance to the development and happiness of individuals. The relational needs of rural teachers are reflected in the following four aspects: first, in terms of cooperation and support among colleagues, in rural schools, teachers tend to be a relatively close-knit team, and they need to cooperate, support, and collaborate with each other in order to deal with various challenges in school work. However, due to the limited promotion channels and lack of career development opportunities in rural schools, there are mutual suspicions, competition and conflicts among colleagues, leading to tensions among teachers. This lack of solidarity, cooperation and humane care among colleagues fails to satisfy the rural teachers' desire for close interpersonal relationships. Secondly, some rural teachers pay too much attention to the external value of their profession, pursuing high titles and high salaries, and regard teaching as an extra job. They are eager to look for external resources, and even use bribes to climb the "official", through acquaintances to get through the relationship, and try their best to find a way to "escape" from the countryside, in order to maximize their own interests^[7]. Second, in the relationship with family members, many rural teachers may live with their families in rural areas, and they need to establish good relationships with their spouses, children and other family members, whose support and understanding are crucial to the work and life of rural teachers. However, working in rural areas may face problems such as being far away from home and working more intensively. If rural teachers' working hours are unevenly distributed, family relationships are strained or family members do not understand their work, this will increase the psychological burden on rural teachers. Third, the relationship between rural teachers and their students is also crucial in terms of interaction and understanding with their students. They need to establish a close and trusting relationship with their students to facilitate their learning and growth. However, most of the students in rural schools are left-behind children, and most of them are cared for by the elderly. Rural teachers may face problems such as strained relationships with students, communication difficulties, and poorly motivated parental involvement, leading to poor interaction and relationships between rural teachers and students, which may affect their enthusiasm for their work and their emotional state, and undermine their self-confidence. Fourth, in communication and cooperation with community residents, in some rural areas, communities may be relatively closed and lack external resources and communication platforms, resulting in rural teachers feeling isolated in their communities and lacking opportunities to communicate and interact with colleagues, family members, and community residents, which affects their social needs. Therefore, the fulfillment of relational needs is crucial to both the work and life of rural teachers, helping to enhance their job satisfaction and professional well-being, as well as their sense of belonging to the countryside.

1.1.3 Growth needs

Growth needs include the individual's needs for self-realization, growth and development, reflecting the individual's desire for personal development and progress, and are the key to realizing the individual's self-worth. The growth needs of rural teachers mainly refer to the needs of professional development and career development of rural teachers, which mainly include the realization of self-worth, the promotion of title, professional development, and the acquisition of honor. ^[8] For rural teachers, the growth needs are often difficult to be satisfied, first of all, it is the lack of educational resources, rural areas compared with urban areas, its educational resources are relatively scarce, rural teachers may not be able to obtain the same educational resources and information as urban teachers, may be a lack of advanced educational technology, teaching equipment and teaching material resources, the lack of high-quality educational resources may affect the quality of rural teachers' teaching and teaching effectiveness, which brings certain limitations to the professional growth of rural teachers. Secondly, rural teachers may have relatively limited opportunities for professional development. Due to factors such as insufficient educational resources, backward school conditions and small school size, rural teachers may lack opportunities for further education and learning to obtain higher educational levels or professional qualifications, and the lack of promotion opportunities and career advancement paths may affect the motivation and incentive for rural teachers' professional development. Third, there is insufficient professional training. In some rural areas, professional training opportunities may be insufficient, making it difficult for rural teachers to receive systematic and sustained professional training and to keep abreast of new knowledge, technologies and methods of education and teaching. The lack of professional training may lead to a relative lag in the teaching level of rural teachers, making it difficult for them to meet the ever-changing demands of education, resulting in the inability of rural teachers to effectively improve their teaching level and affecting the fulfillment of their growth needs. Fourthly, there is a lack of incentives. In some rural schools, the lack of incentives may become an obstacle to the growth of rural teachers. Lack of incentives will make rural teachers lack motivation to pursue higher career development and professional growth. Finally, it is, the imperfect education system, the growth needs of rural teachers may also be affected by the imperfect education system. From the point of view of real teaching practice, the current management of rural schools in China is relatively loose, "county-based" education management system in the implementation of the process cannot be put into practice, it is difficult for teachers to participate in the development of the school, resulting in the loss of some rural teachers.^[9] In some rural areas, the education system is not sound, and there is a lack of effective support and management for rural teachers, resulting in the growth needs of rural teachers not being effectively guaranteed. The current situation of the growth needs of rural teachers is complex and varied, and is affected by many factors. In order to improve the status quo of the growth needs of rural teachers, it is necessary for the government, schools and society to work together to strengthen the educational investment in rural teachers, to stimulate the growth motivation and enthusiasm of rural teachers, and to promote the healthy development of their personal and professional development.

2. Paths to Enhance Rural Teachers' Professional Happiness

Enhancing the professional happiness of rural teachers is one of the most important factors in making rural teachers "stay". Happiness comes mainly from three aspects: survival, socialization and self-development.

2.1 Survival needs are the foundation

2.1.1 Raising wages and improving welfare protection

In order to attract and keep more rural teachers, it is necessary to improve the professional happiness of rural teachers. Improving professional happiness starts from meeting the basis of survival of rural teachers, and improving salary and welfare benefits and improving welfare protection is a direct way to be able to meet the survival needs of rural teachers. The Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Construction of the Teaching Staff in the New Era not only emphasizes the need to build a high-quality teaching staff, but also stresses the need to improve the treatment of teachers, push forward the reform of the teachers' salary system, and increase the incentives for teachers, so that teachers can really become an enviable profession.^[10] In terms of salary and remuneration, the government should increase financial allocations for rural education, review and adjust the salary standards for rural teachers, provide better salary and benefits for rural teachers by improving the efficiency of the use of education funds and optimizing the structure of the use of funds, etc., to ensure that the level of their salaries can be comparable to that of urban teachers, and ensure that sufficient education funds are used to improve the salary and benefits of rural teachers, and, at the same time, should ensure that salaries are paid in a timely manner and reasonably adjusted to reflect inflation and changes in the cost of living. Schools should establish a performance pay system, set up incentives for teaching, scientific research, and teacher ethics to encourage teachers to continually improve their professionalism and the quality of their teaching, and link teachers' salaries to their teaching quality, student achievement, and other performance indicators, to reward teachers with outstanding performance. In terms of welfare protection, set up a special fund or program for dealing with sudden difficulties faced by rural teachers, such as major illnesses and natural disasters, and provide timely financial assistance and relief. Provide comprehensive medical insurance. The government can provide rural teachers with comprehensive medical insurance covering basic medical expenses, including outpatient, hospitalization, and pharmaceutical expenses, to reduce their medical burden, and provide health management services, including regular medical checkups and health counseling, to promote the physical and mental health of rural teachers and to reduce financial losses due to illness. The Government can solve the housing problems of rural teachers and improve their quality of life and sense of security by providing housing subsidies or low-cost housing. The Government can help rural teachers solve their children's education problems and reduce the burden on their families by providing children's education allowances or priority schooling policies. The Government can help rural teachers cope with the pressures of work and life by establishing a mental health support system and providing them with psychological counselling and support services.

2.1.2 Improvement of working conditions

First, teaching facilities should be improved. The Government and schools should invest more in improving teaching facilities in rural schools, including classrooms, laboratories and libraries, and provide advanced teaching equipment and resources. Secondly, the Government and schools should optimise the teaching environment, create a good teaching environment, ensure that classrooms are ventilated and well lit, provide comfortable teaching furniture and equipment, and create an atmosphere suitable for learning and teaching. Thirdly, the government and schools should provide technical support by providing the necessary technical equipment and network support, such as computers, projectors and the Internet, so as to help rural teachers carry out information-based teaching and sharing of teaching resources. Fourthly, the government and schools should rationalise

working hours and provide good living and working facilities, such as canteens and rest rooms, to make the work of rural teachers more convenient and comfortable, to ensure that they have normal rest and leave, and that there should not be the phenomenon of one person taking up more than one job, so as to avoid overtime work and overwork. Fifthly, the government and schools should strengthen campus security, safeguard the personal safety of teachers and students, and provide a safe learning and working environment. Sixth, the government and schools should establish a sound support system for the teaching force, including a platform for teacher exchanges and a platform for sharing teaching resources, so as to promote exchanges and co-operation among rural teachers. Seventh, the government should improve living support facilities and increase investment in infrastructure development in rural areas, including roads, water supply, power supply and other infrastructure development, so as to enhance the convenience of life for rural teachers and improve their living environment. Through the above measures, the working conditions of rural teachers can be effectively improved, their job satisfaction and occupational happiness enhanced, and their work enthusiasm and creativity stimulated, thus promoting the development of rural education.

2.2 Relationship needs are key

2.2.1 Establishing a good teacher-student relationship

The relationship needs of rural teachers are an important guarantee to promote the smooth running of education and teaching, and to improve the efficiency and quality of teaching, and should be emphasized and supported by education management departments and schools at all levels. To establish a good teacher-student relationship, firstly, a harmonious campus atmosphere should be created. Schools should create a harmonious and cozy campus atmosphere, so that both students and teachers can feel cordial and harmonious. Secondly, schools should advocate the concept of equal and respectful teacher-student relationship so that teachers and students respect each other and treat each other as equals. Schools should encourage positive communication and interaction between teachers and students, establish a system of regular teacher-student symposiums or class meetings, provide an open platform where teachers and students can speak freely and communicate frankly, and encourage teachers to establish a relationship of mutual trust with students, and teachers should be honest with students and maintain good communication with them. Thirdly, schools should care about student development. Schools and teachers should care about students' learning and growth, provide guidance and assistance in learning, and pay attention to students' personality development and mental health. Fourth, schools can organize colorful educational and cultural activities, such as cultural performances, sports competitions, social practices, etc., to cultivate school culture and enhance interaction and communication between teachers and students. Fifth, schools establish a fair and just reward and punishment mechanism to encourage students to perform well, and at the same time punish bad behavior appropriately to maintain campus order. Sixth, the school encourages parents to participate in school education management and teaching activities, strengthens communication and cooperation between home and school, and cares for the growth and development of students together. Through the above methods, rural schools can establish good teacher-student relationships, promote the development of school education and improve the quality of teaching, and provide good protection for the healthy growth of students.

2.2.2 Enhancement of professional identity and sense of belonging

As a member of the rural education cause, rural teachers have the right to fully express their own needs and participate in educational activities, and the teachers' perceived value of their profession

is fully manifested in their participation in the education cause and the sense of existence they obtain. Enhancing rural teachers' professional identity and sense of belonging can be done in the following ways: First, give rural teachers more autonomy in education and teaching, encourage them to flexibly adjust their teaching content and methods according to the actual situation and students' needs, and enhance their sense of responsibility and fulfillment. To enhance rural teachers' sense of professional identity and belonging, we can take the following measures: first, we need to give rural teachers more autonomy in education and teaching, encouraging them to flexibly adjust their teaching content and methods in accordance with the actual situation and the needs of their students, so as to enhance their sense of responsibility and achievement. We need to encourage teachers to participate in decision-making and management, give them more opportunities to participate in decision-making and management, respect the right of individual discourse, and allow them to participate in school planning, curriculum design and the formulation of teaching and learning activities, so as to enhance their sense of belonging to the school and their sense of responsibility. Secondly, we need to strengthen social recognition and respect for rural teachers, improve their social status and reputation, let them feel the value and importance of their profession, and enhance their sense of professional identity. Thirdly, we need to establish a sound reward mechanism for teachers, and give awards and commendations to outstanding rural teachers, so as to stimulate their motivation and enthusiasm for work, and enhance their sense of identity and belonging to the profession. Fourth, we need to establish a positive school culture, promote the fine tradition and spirit of education and teaching, and build up rural teachers' sense of professional honour and pride. Fifth, we need to strengthen teamwork and mutual assistance, encourage teachers to strengthen teamwork and mutual assistance among themselves, work together to solve difficulties and problems encountered in teaching, share teaching resources and experience, and enhance the sense of belonging and cohesion. Sixth, we need to care for the life and emotional needs of teachers, give them emotional support and encouragement, and enhance their sense of belonging and loyalty to the school. Seventh, we need to provide personalised support. Schools can provide personalized support and assistance according to the actual needs of rural teachers, such as family support, psychological counseling, career development guidance, etc., so as to enhance their sense of belonging and happiness, and to let them feel that the school cares about and supports them, and to enhance their sense of belonging.

3. Growth needs as a driving force

3.1 Realizing the professional development of rural teachers

Growth is one of the intrinsic needs of human beings, and education is a great profession aiming to make both the educator and the educated better, which can only be more conducive to the perfection and development of the educated if the educator consciously perfects himself/herself.^[11] This is also true for rural teachers. By meeting their growth needs, teachers can gain a sense of fulfillment and pride, increase their professional satisfaction, and enhance their commitment and enthusiasm for education. Schools should give teachers space for development, motivate teachers to realize their self-worth step by step, avoid the phenomenon of "frustration-return", and alleviate the problem of one-way flow of rural backbone teachers.^[12] Therefore, it is necessary to effectively implement the national policy requirements of revitalizing rural education, and "implement the state's policy preferences for rural teachers in terms of treatment, title appraisal, housing, and so on, and expand their diversified social resources".^[13] In order to realize the professional development of rural teachers, start from the following aspects: first, provide professional training and learning opportunities for rural teachers, and organize professional training and refresher courses for rural teachers, covering knowledge and skills in education and teaching, education management, and

mental health. These trainings can be in the form of regular seminars and lectures, as well as attending courses on online education platforms or arranging for exchanges and learning in urban schools. Second, a mentor system for rural teachers should be established, with experienced and outstanding teachers serving as mentors to guide rural teachers in their teaching practice and personal growth, providing professional guidance and support. Third, rural teachers are encouraged to participate in educational research and innovative practices, carry out educational and teaching reforms and curriculum development, and cultivate their educational innovation ability and practical experience. Fourth, schools should set up career advancement paths for rural teachers, establish a sound evaluation mechanism and promotion criteria, and encourage teachers to be promoted through their performance in teaching quality, educational research and social services. Fifth, schools should organise rural teachers to participate in educational seminars, academic exchanges and other activities, so as to promote exchanges and co-operation among teachers, and to share teaching experience and educational achievements. Sixth, schools are required to establish a long-term teacher training mechanism, provide individualised career development planning and counselling services for rural teachers, help them to clarify their career development goals and formulate plans for achieving them, and provide the necessary support and resources to promote their career growth and development and to continuously improve their professionalism and teaching ability. Through the above measures, the career development needs of rural teachers can be effectively met, their teaching standards and professionalism can be enhanced, and the sustainable improvement of education quality can be promoted, leading to the healthy development of rural education.

3.2 Realization of self-seeking and self-worth

The Government, schools and society should work together to provide rural teachers with a creative and developmental working environment and development opportunities, to stimulate their motivation and creativity, and to realize the common development of their personal values and the cause of education. First of all, teachers should set well-defined personal goals, including teaching goals, career development goals and personal life goals. These goals should be specific, quantifiable and able to motivate themselves to make continuous progress. Rural teachers should continue to learn and improve their professional knowledge and teaching skills, participate in various trainings, seminars, courses, etc., to acquire the latest educational theories and practical experience, and continuously improve their teaching abilities. Secondly, they should establish a correct outlook on life, values and career, adhere to correct educational concepts, and endeavor to create a positive educational atmosphere to stimulate students' interest and learning potential. In any position, we should be full of expectation and longing, in its position, to do their jobs, and really bring the maximum degree of happiness to themselves and others.¹⁴ Rural teachers should recognize that they are taking on the important responsibility of education, and need to be responsible for the quality of teaching and the growth of their students, abide by professional conduct and ethics, adhere to the concept of student-centered education, and provide students with quality educational services. Finally, rural teachers should focus on cultivating their own personal hobbies and interests, participating in cultural and artistic activities, sports and fitness campaigns, etc., to enrich their spare time, maintain their physical and mental health, and enhance their sense of satisfaction in their self-seeking.

4. Conclusion

In summary, rural teachers are the cornerstone for promoting the high-quality development of rural education, an important force for promoting rural revitalization, and the main body of

grassroots education. Based on the ERG theory, the needs of rural teachers are divided into three levels: survival needs, relationship needs and growth needs, so as to explore the paths to enhance the professional happiness of rural teachers, including: increasing salary and improving welfare protection, improve working conditions, establish good teacher-student relationships, enhance professional identity and sense of belonging, realize the professional development of rural teachers, and realize self-pursuits and self-worth.

References

- [1] Li Sen, Cui Youxing. *Investigation and research on the status quo of rural teachers' professional development in the process of new urbanization - Based on the empirical analysis of four provinces and cities of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Chongqing* [J]. *Education Research*, 2015(7):98-107.
- [2] Zhao B, Li Y, Zhang Dajun. *A study on the status and influencing factors of teachers' professional well-being in special education schools in Sichuan and Chongqing* [J]. *China Special Education*, 2012(1):42-46.
- [3] In addition, Yu Li, Song Fengning, Song Shuwen. *Educational Organizational Behavior* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2009: 139.4.
- [4] Jiang Chao. *Work-life dualization: a new pattern of rural teachers' profession in the context of urbanization* [J]. *Chinese Journal of Education*, 2018(7):94-99.
- [5] Cha Haiyang. *The absence and return of rural teachers' professional happiness in the field of "field dynamics"*[J]. *Teaching and Management*, 2023, (21): 49-53.
- [6] Yung Chung-kwai. *The logical starting point of rural teacher development in the new era* [J]. *Research on Education Development*, 2019(20):3.
- [7] Shi Ruijiao, Fang Hong. *The Dilemma, Reasons and Realization Path of Cultural Creation of Rural Teachers* [J]. *Education Guide*, 2018(9):74-77.
- [8] Luo Mengyuan, Zhang Anti. *A Review of Rural Teacher Mobility in the Context of ERG Theory*[J]. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 2020, 7 (06): 103-109.
- [9] Zhang Yinan. *Problems and Countermeasures of Rural Teachers' Loss in the Perspective of Professional Happiness* [J]. *Teaching and Management*, 2021, (24): 35-38.
- [10] *Opinions of the State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Construction of Teaching Staff in the New Era* [J]. *Bulletin of the State Council of the People's Republic of China*, 2018(5): 16-23.
- [11] Ye Lan. *Teacher's Role and Teacher's Development* [M]. Beijing: Education Science Press, 2001: 5.
- [12] Huang Xiaoxi, Cheng Lianghong. *Wandering between urban and rural tension: rural teachers' identity crisis and its response* [J]. *Contemporary Education and Culture*, 2019, 11(04): 80- 86.
- [13] He Shiyu. *Research on the Professional Happiness of "New Generation" Rural Teachers--Based on the Perspective of ERG Theory*[J]. *New Curriculum Guide*, 2022, (16): 25-27.