

Rural Teachers' Teaching Autonomy and Sense of Professional Gain in the Context of Localized Education

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Abstract: Rural educators confront numerous challenges, including scarcity of educational resources, constrained developing prospects, and arduous working conditions that profoundly hinder the advancement of educational standards. An examination into the nexus between teaching autonomy and sense of professional gain has revealed that empowering rural teachers with greater autonomy in their teaching practices not only fosters creativity and adaptability in their pedagogical approaches but also markedly fortifies their occupational development initiative and sense of professional gain. In the practice of localized education, teachers have the capacity to integrate local cultural and community resources into their curricula, fostering a more holistic and culturally relevant educational experience. This integration not only amplifies their teaching effectiveness but also bolsters their feelings of achievement. Ultimately, this article proposes a strategic framework aimed at enhancing teachers' sense of professional gain and catalyzing the sustainable progression of rural education by augmenting their teaching autonomy within the context of localized educational practices.

1. Introduction

General Secretary Chairman Xi, at a meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, put forward the important concept of “letting the people have a greater sense of gain”, with the sense of gain being one of the basic indicators of the effectiveness of reform and development. At the same time, the education sector is facing unprecedented challenges, particularly in rural areas. The development process of rural education is relatively slow, and the problem of lack of resources is serious, especially the serious loss of excellent teachers, which has become a major obstacle restricting the improvement of the quality of rural education ^[1]. As the core force of rural education, improving the sense of professional gain of rural teachers has become the key to guaranteeing the sustainable and healthy development of rural education.

Concurrently, the distinctive nature of rural education poses numerous difficulties and challenges for rural educators in their teaching endeavors. To address this, granting rural teachers increased autonomy in their teaching methodologies and empowering them to adapt their instructional strategies flexibly in accordance with the special needs of local students and the cultural backdrop, serves as an effective means of fostering a heightened professional development initiative and inspiring their intrinsic drive. This, in turn, enhances the professional gain experienced by rural

teachers^[2].

Drawing from the positive psychology concept of "sense of gain" and rooted in the distinctive lens of localized education, this study delves into the correlation between the teaching autonomy afforded to educators by school administration and their inherent sense of professional gain. Through a rigorous examination of how this autonomy fosters the intrinsic motivation driving rural teachers' professional develop, the objective of this paper is to offer novel theoretical insights and practical strategies for bolstering rural teacher workforce, ultimately advancing the holistic enhancement of rural educational standards.

2. Teaching autonomy: the driving force of teachers' professional development

2.1 Definition of teaching autonomy

Teaching autonomy refers to the externally defined rights granted to teachers by administrative authorities, encompassing their authority to control and direct the courses and teaching situations they are responsible for ^[3]. According to self-determination theory, individual growth in terms of motivation, emotions, and behaviors is contingent upon the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging ^[4]. Process theory in managerial psychology further underscores that the satisfaction of needs is influenced not solely by the needs themselves but also by the various factors in the work process ^[5]. It is imperative for school administrators to relinquish their dominant role in teaching and empower frontline teachers, thereby enabling them to autonomously establish clear teaching objectives, select more suitable instructional methods, develop proficiency in their respective teaching activities, and proactively engage in self-feedback and adjustments, ultimately leading to enhanced work performance in practice.

2.2 Teaching autonomy needs to be improved

In our current primary and secondary school management practices, there has been a notable lack of emphasis on teachers' teaching autonomy^[3]. Regarding management control, the administrative decision-making and management model employed by the school has imposed numerous regulations on curriculum design and general teaching behaviors, including teaching content, selection of teaching materials, scheduling of classes, and decision-making pertaining to teaching tasks. These regulations often necessitate consistency and uniformity in teaching practices. Although such stringent control over teaching may mitigate certain risks, it simultaneously undermines teachers' autonomy in all facets of their teaching endeavors, which ultimately hinders educational innovation and effective teacher management.

Thus, fostering teaching autonomy is integral to the professional growth of educators. By granting teachers autonomy in their instructional practices, they are empowered to tailor their teaching methodologies to the unique needs of their students, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. Moreover, this process fosters introspection on teaching theories and practices, enabling teachers to gain personal insights, innovate, and achieve personal and professional growth ^[6].

3. Sense of professional gain as an endogenous motivation to stimulate the development of rural teachers

3.1 Sense of professional gain

General Secretary Chairman Xi clearly put forward the important concept of “letting the people

have a greater sense of gain” at a meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, and has continued to emphasize this concept in a number of subsequent important meetings and speeches, which profoundly embodies the deep concern of the Party and the nation for improving the actual level of access and development of the people. It is evident that augmenting the professional gain of educators in rural areas is a pivotal matter that aligns with the trajectory of national progression.

The sense of professional gain is a subjective perception, representing an individual's subjective assessment of their own professional advancement. In the context of rural education, a rural teacher's sense of professional gain pertains to a positive and internal subjective experience derived from the material resources and developmental factors intimately tied to their personal survival and growth. This experience encompasses recognition of their profession and their commitment to continuously dedicate themselves to the field of education ^[1,5,7]

3.2 The current status of teachers' sense of professional gain in China

Currently, Chinese researchers predominantly delve into the demographic disparities in teachers' sense of professional gain, with the majority of research pertaining to its influencing factors remaining confined to theoretical discourse, accompanied by a scarcity of empirical investigations ^[5]. Within the realm of education, a select group of researchers has zeroed in on the sense of professional gain among rural primary and secondary school educators. The overall sense of professional gain among these educators is suboptimal, manifested as inconspicuous educational accomplishments, pronounced individual variations and so on.

A survey conducted in a district of Chongqing on the sense of gain of rural secondary school teachers revealed that while their overall income has escalated, and they have greater satisfaction with personal growth, they exhibit a dearth of robust professional convictions and sentiments. Their educational achievements remain inconspicuous, and their educational aspirations remain unfulfilled ^[8]. Furthermore, a randomized sample survey among rural primary and secondary school teachers in Henan Province indicated a moderately high level of professional gain, albeit with substantial internal variations. Notably, female teachers reported a heightened sense of professional gain, whereas educators with higher educational qualifications and teaching at higher grades in rural settings demonstrated a weaker sentiment. Conversely, teachers occupying higher positions exhibited a more pronounced sense of professional gain ^[9]. In stark contrast, sense of professional gain among education and teaching professionals at the compulsory education level in rural Qidong County, Hunan Province, hovers at a medium-low level, characterized by the lowest scores pertaining to career experience and the highest scores concerning career achievements ^[10].

3.3 Different dimensions of sense of professional gain work together to stimulate endogenous motivation

According to the actual survival and development of rural teachers, corresponding to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Marx's anthropological thought, Cui subdivided rural teacher's sense of professional gain into five dimensions: the sense of material acquisition, the sense of professionalism, the sense of fairness, the sense of achievement, and the sense of spiritual access ^[11]. Teachers' salaries, benefits, housing and other material resources sustain the needs of rural teachers such as food, clothing, housing and transportation, which affects the sense of material acquisition of rural teachers. On the basis of material satisfaction, rural teachers also pursue professional development, status enhancement and other needs to be satisfied. Rural teachers expect to obtain a sense of fairness in title evaluation, development opportunities, rewards and punishments, a sense of satisfaction in teacher duties and subject teaching, a sense of achievement based on teachers' self-

growth and students' development, as well as an ideal realm and peak experience generated by the practice of education and teaching.

The enhancement of teachers' sense of professional gain is a complex and multifaceted process that requires thinking and practicing from many aspects. Research on teachers' sense of gain has found that the atmosphere of respecting teachers, enhancing teachers' active participation, and reflecting teachers' subjective status through democratic school governance can improve teachers' sense of acquisition to a certain extent ^[11,12]. A good sense of professional gain can significantly enhance rural teachers' sense of professional self-efficacy, and further confirm and deepen their knowledge of self-worth and deep understanding of the meaning of their work, thus strengthening their sense of responsibility and happiness, and ultimately promoting the sustainable development of rural teachers, so that rural teachers can really “go down, stay, use and teach well”.

4. Teaching autonomy plays an important role in teachers' sense of professional gain

4.1 Teaching autonomy enhances subjective initiative

There are several possible pathways for the impact of teaching autonomy on sense of professional gain, and possible pathways are explored below using professional development initiative as an example.

Teachers' professional development initiative refers to the positive traits and abilities of teachers in their professional growth path, actively oriented to the goals set by individuals, actively seeking to change the status quo of their own professional development and the external environment, the effective use of external resources, and the stimulation of internal potential, so as to continuously improve the level of personal professional development ^[13]. Authorization process theory states that when leaders delegate the control of organizational resources to their subordinates, the subordinates' power needs are satisfied, and this satisfaction will motivate the subordinates to take the initiative to complete the relevant work ^[14].

In school teaching, the acquisition of teaching autonomy makes frontline teachers' power needs satisfied, which in turn prompts them to show stronger internal motivation and behavior in teaching. Research reveals that rural teachers' teaching autonomy has a significant impact on their professional development motivation^[2]. As a key work resource, autonomy has a high intrinsic motivational value. When having more teaching autonomy, rural teachers have a stronger sense of control, are more internally motivated to cope with work demands, are willing to think proactively about problems in their professional development practices, and proactively exert their intrinsic potential toward their own professional development goals.

4.2 Subjective initiative promotes the sense of professional gain

The professional development of rural teachers is deeply affected by their own initiative, and they need to give full play to their personal initiative as a driving force to continuously improve their professionalism and realize the high-quality development of their career. The mobility of teachers' professional development runs through all aspects of their professional growth practice, reflecting the attitude of rural teachers' active reflection and conscious action on professional development, which plays a crucial role in the development trajectory of teachers' career ^[13]. With the improvement of professional development initiative, rural teachers give full play to their own subjective initiative, put their reflections on theories into practice, actively solve difficulties, adjust and improve deficiencies, and at the same time continuously improve their competitiveness, and enhance their sense of professional gain in practice.

5. Teaching autonomy and sense of professional gain in localized education

5.1 Localized education for young teachers to adapt to the countryside and develop themselves

Most of the rural teachers, especially the newly recruited young teachers in rural schools, face many challenges such as adapting to the rural life, self-identity dilemma and constraints on professional development ^[15]. The proposal of localized education is precisely to solve the crisis of low quality of rural education, students' indifference to identity, and teachers' loss of identity caused by the lack of local identity of rural teachers and students. The educational concept of localized education based on local ecology and living environment requires rural teachers to be rooted in the unique history, culture, economy, art and other backgrounds of the local area, and to conduct more teaching reflections related to the local culture, so as to encourage teachers to accept and integrate into the local life. At the same time, unlike the traditional education model of uniformity, localized education encourages teachers to adapt to the rural education environment, give full play to their own professionalism and creativity, and stimulate the emergence of their individual wisdom. While realizing the integration of education and local culture, it gives rural teachers a platform for independent play, enhances their sense of self-efficacy, realizes their identity, and thus promotes the sense of professional gain of rural teachers.

5.2 Curriculum development and teachers' autonomy in localized education

As there is generally no established curriculum standard for localized education, rural teachers are required to go deep into the countryside, understand the local community background and customs, respect students' original life experience and cognitive foundation, pay attention to students' needs, actively explore and make use of the local resources and values, and then make concerted efforts to fully develop a school-based curriculum that conforms to the local reality ^[15]. This process requires teachers to independently transform and improve the content of education, so that education is adapted to the local area, highlighting the value of regional positioning, and ultimately improving the quality of rural education. Encouraging rural teachers to fully develop and use local curricula as an important mechanism to carry out localized education for rural teachers provides a flexible teaching space for rural teachers ^[15]. As the main implementers of curriculum development, rural teachers are given teaching autonomy and can make certain autonomous decisions in curriculum design, classroom innovation and campus culture leadership. When rural teachers master the teaching autonomy as an important work resource, they also have a stronger internal motivation and sense of control over their work, and are more willing to focus on their educational work with a positive emotional state to improve their own competitiveness, so as to have a higher degree of professional development initiative, stimulate their internal motivation, and then enhance their sense of professional gain ^[12].

5.3 Enhancing rural teachers' sense of professional gain and promoting sustainable rural development

Education in rural primary and secondary schools is disconnected from local culture, and education of local culture is gradually hidden under the background of urbanization. Teachers and students in rural areas receive education that is disconnected from rural ecology and far away from local ecology, and are filled with the utilitarian orientations of “leaving the countryside” and “upward mobility to the city” ^[16], which profoundly threaten the sustainable development of the countryside. Utilitarian orientation, profoundly threatening the sustainable development of the

countryside. Localized education gives teachers a certain degree of teaching autonomy, and in the process of practice, rural teachers have the opportunity to learn about local culture, deepen their thinking about rural culture, and feel and understand the countryside from the cognitive and experiential point of view. This process can lead and promote the development of rural culture and education, and the development of rural culture will in turn enhance the confidence and sense of mission of rural teachers, strengthen their belief in teaching, enhance their sense of professional gain, and ultimately promote the sustainable development of the countryside.

6. Empowering teaching autonomy to enhance the sense of professional gain

It can be seen through the discussion in this paper that teaching autonomy plays a key role in enhancing rural teachers' sense of professional acquisition. On this basis, localized education provides rural teachers with a practice platform with a broad space for development and empowers them with autonomy, which not only helps them to enhance the diversity and interest of the classroom, but also further strengthens their sense of accomplishment and sense of belonging to the profession.

Based on the above analysis, this paper makes the following recommendations:

(1) Creating incentives to enhance rural teachers' sense of autonomous action

Rural schools can start by creating incentive mechanisms to promote teachers' exercise of teaching autonomy, encourage rural teachers to take the initiative in exercising their autonomy, form a good atmosphere of independent innovation, and ensure that teaching autonomy is fully utilized.

(2) Promoting localized education and giving teachers autonomy in curriculum design

In the curriculum design, classroom innovation and campus culture leadership of localized school-based curriculum, rural schools can cultivate the teaching self-discipline of rural teachers in autonomous decision-making and reflection, stimulate the teachers' own intrinsic needs in the process of education and teaching, and realize their own potential ^[17].

(3) Implementation of localized education to give teachers autonomy in choosing the teaching process

Pay attention to the promotion of localized education and give full play to the advantages of localized education, so as to enable teachers to independently choose appropriate teaching contents and teaching methods, demonstrate teaching characteristics and realize teaching innovation.

(4) Bringing education results back to the countryside and empowering teachers to evaluate themselves

Evaluation as the end link of teaching is often missing in the practice of rural teachers, increasing the power to evaluate student learning will have a great positive effect on the quality of teachers' teaching ^[18]. If rural teachers are given certain evaluation power, it can help them understand the real state of students' learning and insight into the actual deviation from the expected standard, so as to realize timely and accurate teaching adjustment.

This paper explores the impact of teaching autonomy on rural teachers' sense of professional gain from the perspective of localized education, starting from the local concept of "sense of gain" and deepening the exploration of the factors affecting teachers' sense of professional gain, with a view to providing a basis and management insights for the formulation of strategies of localized education at the level of organization and management, as well as to find a practical implementation path to help localized education in the countryside. In order to provide the basis and management insights for the strategy formulation of localized education at the organizational management level, and to find a practical and feasible implementation path to help rural localized education.

In summary, enhancing rural teachers' sense of professional gain is not only an effective way to

improve the quality of rural education, but also an important element in realizing educational equity in education reform. By giving teachers more autonomy and combining the actual promotion of localized education, the professional satisfaction and teaching effectiveness of rural teachers will be significantly improved, thus promoting the sustainable development of rural education.

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