

The Role Adaptation of Rural Primary School Teachers: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract: This study examines the role adaptation of rural primary school teachers through a literature review, summarizing the current research on general practice teachers and identifying emerging trends. Interviews were conducted with four rural primary school teachers, revealing key challenges: an incomplete understanding of their responsibilities as head teachers, a lack of theoretical and practical guidance in their role as learners, and insufficient research skills in their role as researchers. To address these issues, the study recommends reducing the number of subjects taught by general practice teachers in rural primary schools and providing targeted training, strengthening professional guidance and improving compensation, offering high-quality learning resources and encouraging further education, and establishing educational alliances to enhance teachers' research capabilities.

Keywords: General practice teacher; Teacher role; Role adaptation

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1. Introduction

In 2012, the Ministry of Education, along with other ministries and commissions, issued the *Opinions on Vigorously Promoting the Construction of Teachers in Rural Compulsory Education*, advocating for special enrollment methods such as targeted entrusted training to expand the training scale of bilingual teachers, as well as teachers in music, physical education, and the arts for primary schools^[1]. In 2014, the Ministry of Education, in its *Opinions on the Implementation of the Excellent Teacher Training Plan*, proposed cultivating a cohort of outstanding primary school teachers who are passionate about education, possess extensive knowledge, demonstrate comprehensive abilities, and are capable of meeting the demands of multidisciplinary primary education^[2]. Since then, teachers have gradually become more integrated into the domestic academic field. In December 2022, the China Rural Education Development Research Institute of Northeast Normal University released the *China Rural Education Development Report 2020–2022*, which revealed that a gap still exists between urban and rural primary school teachers, with rural teachers generally having lower qualifications than their urban counterparts^[3]. Therefore, greater attention should be given to rural primary school teachers, ensuring that the remaining teachers can successfully adapt to their roles and deliver quality education.

2. Research status of related issues

The study conducted a literature search on CNKI with the keywords “general practice teachers,” “teacher role,” and “role adaptation.” The search found that the main research contents on the role adaptation of general practice teachers and teachers include the following aspects:

2.1. Research on general practice teachers

Current research on general practice teachers primarily focuses on four key areas: the conceptual framework, teacher training, teacher quality, and training strategies.

In terms of conceptual research, two main viewpoints emerge. The first argues that general practice teachers are established to meet the practical needs of rural primary schools; therefore, they should be capable of adapting to primary school curricula, conducting teaching and research activities, and managing classrooms effectively ^[4]. The second viewpoint emphasizes the integration and collaboration of teachers across disciplines. General practice teachers should align students’ interests with societal needs by implementing thematic curriculum development and integrated curriculum instruction ^[5]. Regarding teacher quality, some researchers suggest that the professional competencies of primary school general practice teachers encompass three main aspects: professional values and ethics, professional knowledge, and professional skills ^[6]. The construction of a literacy model for these teachers can be approached from two dimensions: general literacy and subject-specific literacy ^[7]. The core competencies of general practice teachers should not only enhance teacher education but also contribute to their holistic professional development ^[8]. Training strategies should address both pre-service education and in-service professional development.

2.2. Research on the concept of teacher roles

Numerous studies have explored the concept of teacher roles, with researchers defining teachers’ identities and functions based on different historical periods and perspectives. Some scholars have categorized the evolution of teacher roles across different communication eras, including oral communication, handwritten newspapers, print and electronic media, and digital networks ^[9]. Over the past five years, research has largely focused on how advancements in information technology have influenced teacher roles. For instance, some scholars argue that in human-machine collaborative education, teachers should act as developers, users, and responsible facilitators of AI-driven education ^[10]. Others propose that teachers should take on roles as guides, conversational partners, and catalysts for student awakening ^[11]. In the context of rural education, teachers are increasingly viewed as promoters and leaders of educational revitalization, as well as active participants in community development ^[12]; however, research in this area remains limited. The concept of teacher role adaptation is typically analyzed through the lens of role positioning and adaptation. Overall, research in this field continues to deepen.

2.3. Research on teachers’ role adaptation

The adaptation of rural teachers to their roles has received increasing attention as a significant issue. Rural teachers face challenges such as a “significant gap in living conditions,” “difficult interpersonal communication,” and “limited opportunities for professional development” ^[13]. Their role adaptation can be categorized into three key aspects: cultural adaptation, psychological role adaptation, and professional adaptation ^[14]. The primary challenges faced by new teachers in primary and secondary schools can be further classified into psychological adaptation, teaching adaptation, interpersonal relationship adaptation, school

environment adaptation, and social environment adaptation^[15].

2.4. Research on strategies for teachers' role adaptation

Existing research suggests that strategies for improving teachers' role adaptation primarily focus on three levels: individual teachers, schools, and society. At the individual level, teachers need to acknowledge role conflicts^[16], develop self-encouragement strategies, make psychological adjustments, engage in continuous learning, enhance their professional competencies, and plan their careers effectively. At the school level, the emphasis is on creating a supportive external environment, which includes in-service training, interpersonal support within schools, work-related support, and institutional support. Additionally, strengthening pre-service education and training, improving teacher support systems, and enhancing welfare policies are considered essential measures^[17]. Some studies also highlight the importance of gaining students' understanding and securing parental support.

Overall, research on teachers' role adaptation remains relatively limited. Existing studies predominantly employ qualitative research methods, often relying on small sample sizes, with a lack of large-scale studies. Regarding research subjects, studies have primarily focused on primary and secondary school teachers, kindergarten teachers, and teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. However, there is a noticeable gap in research on the role adaptation of primary school teachers, particularly rural primary school teachers. In general, the existing body of research on the role adaptation of primary and secondary school teachers remains insufficient, and further in-depth analysis of underlying causes, along with the development of systematic theoretical countermeasures, is needed.

3. Definition of the core concepts

3.1. General practice teachers

General practice teachers are not merely educators capable of teaching multiple subjects; they must also possess the ability to integrate and transcend disciplines through collaboration and research, all while maintaining a deep understanding of children. In the era of artificial intelligence, general practice teachers serve as a guide to educational resources and student development^[18]. Meanwhile, Wang and Cai defined a general practice teacher as one who strives for excellence and embodies a broad vision and interdisciplinary thinking^[19].

3.2. The role of general practice teachers

Amid the ongoing curriculum reform, teachers assume eight key roles: knowledge instructor, learner, student mentor, curriculum developer, teaching organizer, team leader, educational researcher, and cultural creator^[20]. The role of general practice teachers encompasses these same responsibilities, requiring them to impart knowledge, engage in continuous learning, guide students, develop curricula, organize teaching, lead teams, conduct educational research, and foster cultural growth.

3.3. Role adaptation of general practice teachers

Role adaptation refers to the physiological and psychological attributes necessary for an individual to effectively fulfill a specific role. It also denotes the level of coordination and unity between the individual and their role within social and economic activities^[21]. The role adaptation of general practice teachers entails possessing the required cognitive and psychological traits for their multifaceted responsibilities, including

knowledge dissemination, continuous learning, student guidance, curriculum development, teaching organization, team leadership, educational research, and cultural creation. Furthermore, it emphasizes the seamless coordination and organic integration of these roles within the educational environment.

4. Role adaptation dilemma and analysis of rural primary school teachers

In the study, four teachers, A1, A2, A3, and A4, were interviewed as research samples, and the plight of rural primary schools was analyzed according to the interview content. The basic info of the four teachers is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic info of teachers

Name	Gender	Marital status	Graduate institutions	Specialty	Graduation year	Work unit	Professional title	Whether or not a head teacher	Teaching subjects
A1	Female	Unmarried	Z Teachers College	Primary Education (General Teacher)	2021	L County G township central primary school	Secondary teachers in primary and secondary schools	Yes	Math, English, fine art
A2	Female	Unmarried	Z Teachers College	Primary Education (General Teacher)	2020	H County X Town central primary school	Secondary teachers in primary and secondary schools	Yes	Math, English
A3	Male	Unmarried	Z Teachers College	Primary Education (General Teacher)	2020	H County Q township a village primary school	Secondary teachers in primary and secondary schools	Yes	Math, English, sports, music
A4	Female	Unmarried	Z Teachers College	Primary Education (General Teacher)	2021	L County F Town middle school primary school	Secondary teachers in primary and secondary schools	Yes	Language, morality, and the rule of law

4.1. Challenges of rural primary school general practice teachers

The advantage of general practice teachers is their ability to integrate disciplines, break down subject barriers, and establish meaningful connections across different fields. However, the downside is that, in practice, the lack of specialized expertise often leads to professional identity confusion among general practice teachers.

Regarding the teaching subjects of the four interviewed teachers, A1 teaches mathematics, English, and art; A2 teaches mathematics and English; A3 teaches mathematics, English, physical education, and music; and A4 teaches Chinese, morality, and rule of law. It is evident that general practice teachers are responsible for multiple subjects, with some even having to switch subjects annually. Each teacher handles more than a dozen classes per week. In general, these teachers are expected to teach everything. However, feedback from the teachers themselves indicates that they still have preferred subjects and areas where they feel less competent. A key reason for these varied teaching assignments is that schools are required to offer a full curriculum as mandated by higher authorities. Yet, these schools—often small rural institutions or micro-schools—frequently struggle with a shortage of qualified staff. As a result, under the broad categorization of “language, mathematics, English, music, physical education, and arts,” teachers are expected to cover all subjects. When assigning teaching responsibilities, schools often prioritize filling subject gaps rather than considering the actual expertise and professional strengths of general practice teachers.

4.2. The heavy burden of being a head teacher

All four interviewed teachers also serve as head teachers. Their assignments to this role were determined by various factors rather than personal choice. Serving as a head teacher is both time-consuming and exhausting, with student management being particularly complex. Some schools implement a dual head teacher system, which provides new general practice teachers with some relief, reducing their workload and pressure. However, in schools without assistant head teachers—especially boarding schools—head teachers experience significant stress and fatigue. According to the feedback from the four teachers, the main challenge of being a head teacher is the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical student management. Most teachers expressed that taking on the role of head teacher requires a period of exploration and adaptation before they can effectively fulfill their responsibilities.

4.3. Learners who lack guidance

Based on interviews with the four teachers in their role as learners, each teacher has their own experiences and learning methods. However, due to the limited availability of local educational resources, general practice teachers in micro-schools often find themselves without anyone to consult when they encounter challenges. Additionally, some teachers rely solely on pursuing a master's degree to enhance their learning. Overall, rural primary school general practice teachers lack long-term learning plans and adequate guidance. Furthermore, their learning is primarily confined to educational content, with limited access to diverse learning styles. In most cases, they rely on a few senior teachers for assistance, as well as related books and course videos.

4.4. Weak researchers

In the field of education and teaching, teachers should not only fulfill their role as educators but also strive to develop as researchers. Interviews with the four teachers revealed that they each face challenges in assuming the role of a researcher. A common issue is their insufficient research capabilities, which hinder their ability to effectively engage in research. One key reason for this is the absence of teaching and research groups in some micro-schools, while in others, research activities are infrequent. Teaching and research efforts primarily focus on lesson planning and open-class teaching. However, as Teacher A4 noted, these activities often fail to achieve the desired impact, lacking depth and remaining largely superficial.

5. Rural primary school teachers' role adaptation to address challenges

5.1. Reducing the number of subjects taught and providing targeted training

At present, rural primary school teachers are responsible for teaching multiple subjects, leading to an excessive workload. To alleviate this burden, measures should be implemented to reduce the number of subjects they are required to teach. General practice teachers are not expected to master every subject; instead, their assignments should be based on their academic background in the arts or sciences, professional expertise, personal interests, and the reality of teacher shortages in specific subject areas. Moreover, existing teacher training primarily focuses on theoretical and practical aspects of education or subject-specific knowledge, with little attention given to the unique challenges faced by general practice teachers. Training programs should, therefore, emphasize interdisciplinary communication and integration, equipping teachers with both pedagogical skills and a broad, cohesive teaching mindset. This approach will help cultivate well-rounded general practice teachers who can effectively navigate their diverse teaching responsibilities.

5.2. Strengthening guidance for rural primary school teachers and enhancing their compensation

Interviews indicate that many rural primary school teachers are in the early stages of their careers, with some assuming the role of head teacher for the first time and lacking relevant experience. In rural areas, where a significant number of students are “left-behind children”—those whose parents have migrated for work and are cared for by grandparents or other relatives—the responsibilities of general practice teachers become even more demanding and complex. To support these teachers, schools and education authorities should integrate resources and provide targeted guidance tailored to the specific conditions of rural primary schools, the characteristics of rural students, and the practical needs of general practice teachers. A clear, actionable guide should be developed to assist head teachers in effectively managing their classes. Additionally, inadequate compensation for head teachers negatively affects their professional identity and motivation. Improving their salaries and benefits will help strengthen their sense of role recognition, enabling them to develop into competent and dedicated head teachers more quickly.

5.3. Providing high-quality learning resources for rural primary school teachers and encouraging further study

Due to their unique circumstances, rural primary schools often struggle with insufficient learning resources and a lack of professional learning communities. General practice teachers in these schools face challenges such as limited access to educational materials and the absence of a structured learning system. To address these issues, rural primary schools should integrate available learning resources to enhance teachers’ professional development. Based on the learning needs of general practice teachers, schools should procure educational courses, professional books on pedagogy, and subject-specific materials. Additionally, establishing collaborative learning communities among general practice teachers, implementing a structured semester-based learning system, and strengthening evaluation and feedback mechanisms will foster a culture of continuous professional growth. Furthermore, schools should promote exchanges and cooperation with other institutions to expand access to off-campus learning resources. Efforts should be made to facilitate the sharing and joint development of learning materials with other schools. For general practice teachers who plan to pursue further studies, schools should reasonably adjust their teaching workloads to alleviate work-related pressure, allowing them the necessary time to prepare for postgraduate entrance exams. Actively encouraging teachers to enroll in in-service graduate programs will further support their professional advancement.

5.4. Forming educational alliances with universities and research institutions to improve scientific research capabilities

Teaching research is crucial for teachers’ professional growth. However, many general practice teachers struggle with weak research skills. On one hand, school-based teaching and research groups often fail to provide adequate leadership; on the other hand, teachers’ scientific research capabilities remain underdeveloped, progressing at a slow pace. To address this, schools should strengthen the role and effectiveness of internal educational research groups by conducting regular research activities and implementing supervision mechanisms to ensure meaningful outcomes. At the same time, schools should encourage general practice teachers to engage in educational research by expanding access to research resources. Forming alliances with universities and research institutions will provide teachers with greater opportunities to enhance their research abilities. Additionally, teachers themselves must take an active role

in improving their teaching and research competencies. They should strive to become both educators and researchers rather than remaining solely in the role of instructors. Regular reflection on teaching practices, continuous learning about educational research, and the gradual development of research skills will enable teachers to better adapt to their dual roles as educators and researchers.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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