

Analysis of the Pathways for Curriculum Construction in Rural Schools from the Perspective of Place-Based Education Theory

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of comprehensively promoting rural revitalization and the modernization of education, the development of rural education has become a key link in realizing Chinese-style educational modernization. As the core vehicle of the educational system, the quality of curriculum construction directly determines the quality of education. Confronted with practical challenges such as the imbalance of educational resources between urban and rural areas, the loss of student population in rural schools, and the “urban-oriented” mobility of teachers, rural education urgently needs to break away from the singular path dependency of “catching up with cities” and reconstruct a curriculum system with local characteristics. Based on the “Place-Based Education Theory,” this paper explores the value implications and practical challenges of curriculum construction in rural schools, proposing curriculum reform pathways that are grounded in local resources, student-development-oriented, and driven by multi-stakeholder collaboration. The research argues that high-quality curriculum construction in rural schools should be based on local sentiment and anchor the dual nature of educational goals—cultivating both a sense of national identity and cultural belonging, and ensuring academic achievement and social mobility. By tapping into natural and humanistic resources to construct a curriculum content pedigree, and by innovating implementation methods and evaluation mechanisms, it promotes the creative transformation of the national curriculum and its school-based implementation. Only in this way can the transformation of rural education from “marginal survival” to “characteristic development” be truly achieved, providing sustainable talent support and cultural impetus for rural revitalization.

Keywords: Place-Based Education Theory; Rural Schools; Curriculum Construction

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The proposal of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China regarding the formulation of the “15th Five-Year Plan” for national economic and social development explicitly called for accelerating the modernization of agriculture and rural areas and solidly advancing comprehensive rural revitalization. The modernization of agriculture and rural areas is not only related to the overall situation of national development but also profoundly affects the overall quality of Chinese-style modernization. Within this strategic deployment, prioritizing the development of rural education is placed in an important position. “If rural education has not yet achieved modernization, we cannot say that Chinese education has achieved modernization.”^[1]This statement highlights the fundamental status of rural education in the process of China’s educational modernization.

The curriculum is the core vehicle of education, and its construction level directly determines the effectiveness of fostering integrity and rounded development of people. The “Deepening Action Plan for Basic Education Curriculum and Teaching Reform” emphasizes adhering to the principles of “adapting measures to local conditions—’one plan per locality’ and adapting measures to

school conditions—'one strategy per school'" to promote the in-depth development of curriculum reform^[2]. Currently, driven by both the rural revitalization strategy and basic education curriculum reform, rural schools face a dual mission: on one hand, they must take root in their localities and respond to the practical proposition of "how to cultivate people"; on the other hand, they must conform to the demands of the times and answer the fundamental question of "what kind of people to cultivate." Therefore, revitalizing rural education and supporting the development of rural schools must ultimately focus on the core link of curriculum construction. Using the "Place-Based Education Theory" as an analytical framework, this study aims to clarify the practical dilemmas of curriculum construction in rural schools, explore actionable pathways for place-based curriculum construction, and provide theoretical support and practical references for the connotative development of rural schools.

1. The Value Implications and Practical Dilemmas of Rural Schools in the Context of Rural Revitalization

1.1 Value Implications: Irreplaceable Cultural Bearer and Social Functions

China has been an agrarian society since ancient times, and rural education has a long history, predating urban education. However, under the impact of globalization and urbanization, the rural population continues to migrate out, the number of students in rural schools decreases year by year, and rural education has long been in a state of marginalization and decline. With the widening gap between urban and rural development, "urban centralism" has gradually become the mainstream educational discourse. Urban education is regarded as synonymous with "quality education," while rural education is labeled as "backward" and "low-quality." A large number of small-scale schools once faced the crisis of merger, and their value was widely questioned.

However, it must be recognized that rural areas will not disappear, and rural education should not be abandoned. As an important inheritor of agricultural civilization and local culture, rural education carries the unique mission of continuing the roots of national culture and cultivating a sense of national identity. Although its form is increasingly "de-massified," it still holds irreplaceable value in promoting social equity, maintaining cultural diversity, and fostering sustainable human development. "We must stand at the intersection of history, reality, and the future, theoretically clarify the legitimacy and advancement of rural education, and construct a modern rural education system that resonates with rural revitalization and features high-quality development."^[3]

As the main carrier of rural education, rural schools are an important link connecting tradition and modernity, the local and the national. With more and more modern schools being established in rural areas, rural education is gradually reshaping its modern image and becoming an important bridge for rural communities to integrate into mainstream society. Pursuing high-quality children's education has become a common aspiration for many rural families. Quality rural education is not only an important "stabilizer" for retaining population and stabilizing society but also plays a key role in improving the rural education ecology and narrowing the urban-rural education gap.

1.2 Practical Dilemmas: Structural Contradictions and Development Bottlenecks

In the new era, rural schools face severe challenges to their survival and development under the multiple pressures of "low birth rates," "urbanization," and the Construction of a Powerful Education Nation. Although the merger and optimization of small-scale schools over the past decade have optimized resource allocation to some extent, they have also brought problems such as idle school buildings, increased commuting burdens for teachers and students, and rising education costs. More prominently, the phenomenon of student attrition is becoming increasingly serious: on one hand, a large number of migrant children flow to cities; on the other hand, influenced by the "siphon effect" of educational resources, families with economic means or high educational expectations tend to send their children to quality schools in cities and counties.

At the same time, the trend of excellent teachers moving "urban-oriented" is evident, leading to a further weakening of the teaching force in rural schools. Students remaining in these schools are often left-behind children, commonly facing issues such as lack of parental affection, absence of family education, and insufficient psychological support, forcing rural schools to undertake teaching and management responsibilities beyond the norm. Against this backdrop, many rural schools fall into a "passive catch-up" mode, blindly imitating urban educational paths. The curriculum tends to become urbanized and exam-oriented, deviating from the original educational purpose of rural education.

The fundamental goal of rural education should not be merely to help rural children escape the countryside, but to prepare them for effective participation in modern social life and provide reasonable channels for social mobility. Therefore, it is imperative to promote the organic unity of exam-oriented education and quality education in rural schools, and the breakthrough for this lies in the systematic reform of curriculum construction.

2. Basic Pathways for Place-Based Curriculum Construction in Rural Schools

Place-based education is an educational practice paradigm rooted in a specific region, relying on local resources, and serving the local population. Its essence is to promote education's shift from "external input" to "endogenous development" based on the deep connection between the school, students, and the community^[4]. Place-based curriculum construction goes beyond the technical logic of traditional curriculum development, carrying the mission of continuing the cultural lineage, nurturing local sentiment, improving educational quality, and cultivating core competencies for our times.

High-quality place-based curriculum construction in rural schools requires establishing curriculum goals from a broader strategic perspective, scientifically planning the curriculum structure and content system, constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative implementation mechanism, and supporting it with developmental evaluation systems, thereby stimulating the innovative vitality of administrators and teachers.

2.1 Recognizing Rural Strength: Cultivating Positive Perceptions for Place-Based Curriculum Construction

Belief is the premise and driving force for action. For a long time, the general public and even rural educators have generally held the stereotypical perception of "rural education as disadvantaged." This mindset can easily lead to negative emotions or even a sense of resignation among educational actors. Only by breaking this cognitive shackle can we truly "see the strength of the countryside."

The practical actors in rural schools—especially the principal and teaching team—need to establish a rational and dialectical view of education, correctly understanding the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools, the educational potential of local resources, and the dual attributes of education itself, which include both educational and selective functions. This is the ideological prerequisite for initiating place-based curriculum construction.

As the leader of the school, the principal should possess a high position, broad vision, and large perspective, actively learn and internalize the concept of place-based education, enhance curriculum leadership, and promote curriculum reform in a coordinated manner at the top-level design level. At the same time, efforts should be made to inspire teachers' "educational sentiment rooted in the local soil," guiding them to recognize the great potential of rural curriculum construction. Organizing teachers to conduct action research, focusing on real problems in curriculum design, development, implementation, and evaluation, can form a complete practice cycle of "identifying problems—analyzing problems—collecting data—intervening actions—evaluating effects," maximizing the mobilization of teachers' enthusiasm and creativity in participating in curriculum construction^[5].

2.2 Grounded in Local Sentiment: Anchoring the Goal Orientation of Place-Based Curriculum Construction

Curriculum goals are the starting point and ultimate destination of curriculum construction. High-quality place-based curriculum goals should adhere to a "student-centered" approach, fully consider the physical and mental development patterns and growth needs of rural youth, integrate the Party and state's educational policies, and translate the national will into educational expressions with school-based characteristics.

The "Compulsory Education Curriculum Reform Outline (Trial)" clearly states that while implementing the national and local curricula, schools can develop or select curricula suitable for their own school based on local actual conditions. This provides policy basis and practical space for rural schools to "creatively implement the national curriculum."

On one hand, curriculum goals should be based on the life world of rural youth and the ecological environment of their "native place," linking families, schools, and communities, expanding the field for student growth, focusing on the cultivation of core competencies, and paying attention to the development of a sound personality. Particularly in curriculum practice, it is essential to strengthen teamwork, critical thinking, and innovation ability, enabling students to grasp happiness, achieving "rooted downward, growing upward."

On the other hand, it is also necessary to face the realistic situation of rural students within the current competitive educational system, ensuring that they obtain necessary academic achievements and possess the basic abilities to participate in educational selection. This determines that place-based curriculum construction in rural schools has a dual goal orientation: one is the cultural educational goal of cultivating national identity and local sentiment; the other is the instrumental goal of guaranteeing academic achievement and social mobility.

The former can be achieved by integrating local cultural elements into the school-based curriculum, while the latter needs to be realized through the place-based adaptation of the national curriculum. Overall, rural schools should seek a dynamic balance between "creatively implementing the national curriculum" and "integrating local resources into the curriculum," achieving mutual

promotion and progress between the two.

2.3 Focusing on Local Resources: Constructing the Content Pedigree for Place-Based Curriculum Construction

The exploration and utilization of curriculum resources are key links in curriculum construction, and their breadth and depth directly affect the richness of curriculum content and the achievement of educational goals.

In the process of transforming local resources into curriculum resources, it is necessary to clearly recognize that the countryside is not only a geographical space concept but also a cultural community of meaning. Therefore, rural resources possess both natural and cultural attributes, covering multiple dimensions such as natural resources, folk customs, local conditions and social customs, productive labor, historical heritage, village regulations and family traditions, and farming techniques. Although these resources are rich and diverse, they must undergo educational value screening and knowledge transformation before being incorporated into the curriculum system^[6].

Based on excellent traditional culture, and centered around specific educational themes, various types of local resources should be systematically extracted and integrated. Utilizing modern information technology and artificial intelligence means, a place-based curriculum resource database can be established. The selection of curriculum content should prioritize “adapting to local conditions,” striving to break through time and space limitations, and realizing that “every moment can be curriculum, everywhere can be a classroom.”

On this basis, it is necessary to sequence and organize curriculum resources according to a certain logical structure, drawing a clear curriculum map, so that connections are formed between different subjects, different grade levels, and different themes. Horizontally, it advocates for problem or theme-oriented, interdisciplinary, cross-domain comprehensive learning; vertically, it follows the laws of students’ cognitive development, reflecting the spiral rise in knowledge depth and breadth, forming a hierarchical and progressive curriculum system.

2.4 Collaborating with Multiple Stakeholders: Transforming the Implementation Mechanism of Place-Based Curriculum Construction

Place-based curriculum construction is a systematic project that cannot be separated from the joint participation of the government, schools, families, communities, and all sectors of society. It is necessary to break the traditional model dominated solely by the school and construct a multi-stakeholder collaborative implementation mechanism characterized by “co-construction, co-governance, and sharing.”

First, expand the boundaries of the curriculum space. Extend learning venues from the classroom to real-world settings in the countryside such as ecological areas, historical sites, and ancestral temples, allowing students to gain complete and profound learning experiences in authentic contexts. At the same time, optimize the layout of classroom space, creating multi-functional learning spaces that integrate knowledge transmission, collaborative communication, and life growth, based on the life experiences and interpersonal interaction characteristics of rural students.

Second, transform teaching methods. Adhere to the principle of “emphasizing practice and inquiry,” adopt thematic and project-based learning methods, and guide students to discover and solve real-life problems. “Teaching and educating lie in subtle details, student growth occurs in activities.” Only when students gain sufficient emotional experience and cognitive construction can the curriculum goals be truly realized.

Third, form professional teams. Involve scholars, local elites, villagers, etc., who have local sentiment and are familiar with local culture, in curriculum development, leveraging their unique value in cultural inheritance and curriculum design. Simultaneously, actively seek policy support and promotional efforts from government departments to create a favorable external environment.

Finally, promote the place-based implementation of the national curriculum. Adapt and reconstruct the sequence, class hour arrangement, teaching organization, and quality evaluation of the national curriculum based on the school’s actual conditions and educational goals, achieving the deep integration of “national requirements” and “local characteristics.”

2.5 Adjusting the Evaluation Lever: Strengthening the Implementation Guarantee for Place-Based Curriculum Construction

Curriculum evaluation is the process of objectively describing and making value judgments about curriculum effectiveness, and it is the core mechanism for ensuring curriculum quality. Since place-based curricula have multiple value orientations, their evaluation should pay more attention to process and development, focusing both on students’ sense of gain and on teachers’ professional growth

and leadership enhancement in curriculum construction.

Place-based curriculum construction is characterized by nonlinearity and dynamism. Teachers invest significant effort but face evaluation risks, which can easily lead to apprehension or non-action tendency due to calculative rationality. To address this, in school-based practice, a method combining “multi-stakeholder evaluation replacing single exam evaluation” with “educational change incentive mechanisms” can be implemented to alleviate the tension between curriculum reform and daily teaching and stimulate teachers’ participation enthusiasm.

In the place-based implementation of the national curriculum, based on focusing on academic quality assessment, a place-based evaluation system should be introduced to conduct multi-dimensional assessments of students’ learning abilities, attitudes, methods, and outcomes. Using tools that combine positive incentives and negative supervision can enhance internal learning motivation, ensure that each student “learns and gains,” and effectively leverage the instrumental value of the curriculum in promoting social mobility.

Furthermore, families and rural society should be included in the scope of evaluation subjects. Students, through student-centered curricula, achieve comprehensive development in interests, emotions, willpower, habits, knowledge, and other aspects, gradually displaying confident, sunny, and positive life attitudes. Teachers also expand their social networks through interaction with the community and families, achieving dual enhancement in professional growth and identity. All subjects cooperate synergistically and grow together, weaving a harmonious educational ecology network encompassing rural schools, families, society, teachers, and students.

As the educational ecology continues to optimize, rural schools will gain more trust and support from local governments, families, and communities, thereby obtaining greater reform autonomy and endogenous development momentum, forming a virtuous cycle of educational change ecology.

Place-based curriculum construction is not a simple replication of urban education, but a return to and reconstruction of the essence of rural education. It requires us to re-recognize the value of the countryside, awaken educators’ local consciousness, activate dormant local resources, and construct an educational practice system rooted in the vast land of China. Only in this way can rural schools escape the dilemma of “dependent development” and embark on a path of characteristic development that combines cultural dignity and educational quality, truly becoming the spiritual engine and talent cradle for rural revitalization.

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