



Research and Practice on the Support Service System for Professional Development of Rural Middle School English Teachers ——A Case Study of Hengyang City, Hunan Province

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Abstract: This study investigates the support service system for the professional development of rural middle school English teachers, using Hengyang City, Hunan Province, as a case study. Through surveys on the current status of rural English teachers' professional development in Hengyang, critical challenges were identified, including insufficient teaching staff, weak disciplinary knowledge, limited training opportunities, low participation in teaching research activities, and reduced job satisfaction. To address these issues, a four-module support service system was developed, integrating expert lectures, micro-lecture collections, project applications, and collaborative teaching research activities. By leveraging resources from universities, government agencies, educational research institutes, and schools, this system significantly enhanced teacher engagement in professional development, enriched teaching resources, improved pedagogical competencies, and elevated student academic performance.

Keywords: Rural middle schools; English teachers; Professional development; Support service system

I. Introduction

In October 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China introduced the Rural Revitalization Strategy, which highlighted the improvement of rural education quality, particularly the quality of rural teachers, as a vital breakthrough for rural revitalization. In July 2020, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with five other departments, jointly issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of the Rural Teacher Team in the New Era," advocating for the development of a team of rural teachers who are passionate about the countryside, adequately staffed, high-quality, and vibrant. Against this backdrop, supporting the professional development of rural teachers has become a highly concerned issue for the entire society.

Research on the professional development of rural middle school English teachers has always been a key concern in the field of education. In China, relevant research has been carried out from multiple dimensions. Lei (2022) studied the living conditions of rural middle school teachers and pointed out its impact on teaching enthusiasm. Sun and Wang (2022) found that rural middle school teachers face problems such as limited training opportunities and shortage of resources.

In addition, some scholars have paid attention to the difficulties in the development of rural middle school English teachers. For example, some research shows that although the professional development policies for rural teachers in the new era have changed, there are still structural contradictions (Li Jing, 2021). Taking rural middle school English teachers as an example, their development faces external difficulties such as insufficient "assistance" from policy mechanisms, imperfect training systems, and lack of humanistic care. At the same time, they also have internal problems such as lack of rural complex and weak cross-cultural competence (Li Jing, 2021). This research also points out that rural complex, good cultural integration ability and local teaching ability are the qualities that rural middle school English teachers in the new era should possess. It explores the professional development path of rural English teachers from aspects such as combining "blood transfusion" with "hematopoiesis", constructing a scientific training system, and improving a diversified guarantee mechanism (Li Jing, 2021).

There is also research focusing on the effectiveness of English teaching in rural junior high schools. The researchers proposed that rural junior high school students' interest in learning English will decrease as the grade level rises and the difficulty increases. To improve the effectiveness of English teaching, teachers should pay attention to students' emotional changes, create a relaxed and democratic teaching environment, adopt diversified teaching methods, and carry out rich classroom activities to stimulate students' interest in learning and cultivate their comprehensive language application ability (Zhang Yan, 2020).

Regarding the group of new middle school English teachers, a research surveyed 661 new middle school English teachers within three years of employment in 216 middle schools in 17 provincial regions across the country. It explored the impacts of internal and external factors such as professional identity, teaching ability, interpersonal relationships, institutional culture, school management, and support systems on the professional development of new teachers, as well as the roles of regional, urban-rural, and gender factors (Liu Runqing et al., 2019).

Abroad, Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasized the significance of high-quality teacher professional development in improving educational quality. She believed that a comprehensive support system, such as effective training, access to



resources, and a collaborative learning environment, is crucial for teachers' growth. Hargreaves (2003) focused on the importance of teachers' professional learning communities in improving teaching practice. He believed that through continuous communication and cooperation within the community, teachers can share experiences and promote their professional development.

However, for rural middle school English teachers in specific regions like Hengyang, China, there is a lack of research that combines local needs with international theories. Our team, from Hengyang Normal University, a local university in Hunan Province, has been committed to the research and practice of supporting the professional development of rural middle school English teachers for many years. With the strong support of local education bureaus, educational research institutes, and rural middle schools, our team has conducted an in-depth survey of the current status of professional development of rural middle school English teachers. Based on this, we have constructed a support service system for the professional development of rural middle school English teachers and carried out a series of support service activities, achieving good results.

II. Current Status of Professional Development of Rural Middle School English Teachers in Hengyang City, Hunan Province

2.1. Survey Results of English Teachers in District and County Middle Schools in Hengyang City

To implement the *National Compulsory Education Quality Monitoring Plan (Revised Edition 2021)*, under the coordination of the Office of the State Council Education Supervision Committee, Basic Education Quality Monitoring Center of the Ministry of Education of China organized the first round of national compulsory education English learning quality monitoring in May 2022. This monitoring was carried out in accordance with the standardized processes and relevant regulatory requirements. The monitoring indicators and tools have gone through repeated demonstrations and multiple rounds of revisions, and the testing process has been verified by the national pilot monitoring practice. The focus of this monitoring was on students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities, comprehensive language application abilities, learning attitudes, and habits. The survey targets for this English subject included students and teachers in Grades 4 and 8 of compulsory education. Additionally, a special sampling survey was conducted on the construction of the English teacher team, English teacher training, and English teacher teaching and research in district and county middle schools. The results of the sampling survey are as following forms (the percentage range for each item represents the interval values across the 12 districts and counties in Hengyang City):

	Proportion of Schools Where the Number of Teachers Cannot Meet Teaching Demand	Proportion of Schools With Teacher Shortages	Proportion of Teachers With Education Below Bachelor's Degree	Proportion of Teachers With Mismatched Majors (Discrepancy Between Teaching Subject on Teacher's Certificate and English Subject)	Proportion of Teachers Without English Proficiency Certificates
Grade 4	5%–69.2%	12.8%–88.2%	1.2%–56.9%	4.2%–72.2%	5.7%–40.1%
Grade 8	0%–31.6%	6.5%–66.7%	0%–13.9%	0%–15.8%	5.1%–28.9%

Form 1

	Proportion of Teachers Who Participated in Training at the Time of Employment (Province; Nationwide)	Total Hours of Training Participated in This Academic Year (Province; Nationwide)	Proportion of Teachers Who Participated in District-Level Teaching and Research Activities This Semester (Province; Nationwide)	Proportion of Teachers Who Participate in School-Level Teaching and Research Activities Weekly
Grade 4	74.6% (79.4%; 75.3%)	44.7 (57.2; 71.7)	51.7% (54.2%; 60.4%)	28.4%
Grade 8	85% (86.6%; 85.9%)	40.6 (57.8; 66.2)	34.5% (50.9%; 58.4%)	52.7%

Form 2

	Proportion of Teachers with Low or Lower Classroom Activity Organization and Implementation Ability	Proportion of Teachers Who Believe Their Professional Ability Cannot Meet Teaching Demand	Job Satisfaction	Proportion of Teachers Who Would Still Choose to Be English Teachers if Given the Option Again
Grade 4	9%–50.1%	55.7%–96.3%	78.6%–100%	52.9%–97.1%
Grade 8	17.8%–54%	70.4%–100%	55.9%–100%	46.9%–85.9%

Form 3

2.2. Challenges and Needs in the Professional Development of Rural Middle School English Teachers in Hengyang City

The survey results in the above forms indicate that the professional development of rural middle school English teachers in Hengyang City faces the following challenges:

2.2.1. Insufficient Teaching Staff: There is a significant disparity in the teaching staff among the 12 districts and counties in Hengyang City. The proportion of schools where the number of Grade 4 and Grade 8 English teachers cannot meet the teaching demand reaches a maximum of 69.2% and 31.6%, respectively. This means that in this region, 69.2% and 31.6% of the schools have an insufficient number of English teachers for Grade 4 and Grade 8. The proportion of schools with teacher vacancies in some counties reaches as high as 88.2% and 66.7%, respectively, indicating that the number of rural middle school English teachers is relatively low, and the teaching staff in some counties is severely insufficient. Some schools have assigned teachers from other subjects to teach English, resulting in a mismatch of majors for some rural middle school English teachers, heavy teaching burdens, and high work pressure, making it difficult to meet new educational demands and challenges. (Form 1)

2.2.2. Weak Subject Knowledge: The survey results of Grade 4 and Grade 8 English teachers in the districts and counties of Hengyang City show that in some counties, as high as 40.1% of Grade 4 English teachers and 28.9% of Grade 8 English teachers have no English proficiency certificates. The proportion of English teachers with education below a bachelor's degree is as high as 56.9% for Grade 4 and 13.9% for Grade 8. This indicates a deficiency in subject knowledge among rural middle school English teachers, which has a certain impact on the academic development and comprehensive quality cultivation of rural students. (Form 1)

2.2.3. Limited Training Opportunities: Rural middle school English teachers in Hengyang City face challenges in receiving professional training. Due to restrictions on transportation, limited access to training information, and insufficient training quotas, rural middle school English teachers often find it difficult to participate in urban training. As a result, the total training hours for Grade 4 English teachers in the district and county this academic year are lower than the provincial average of 12.5 hours and the national average of 27 hours. The total training hours for Grade 8 English teachers are lower than the provincial average of 17.2 hours and the national average of 25.6 hours. This prevents some teachers from being exposed to the latest teaching concepts and methods, thereby affecting the improvement of teaching quality. (Form 2)

2.2.4. Low Participation in Teaching and Research Activities: The data on participation in district and county level teaching and research activities and the frequency of participating in school-level teaching and research activities show that the participation of Grade 4 and Grade 8 English teachers in Hengyang City in teaching and research activities is low. Most teachers passively complete teaching and research activities, and there are few teachers who actively participate. (Form 2)

2.2.5. Low Job Satisfaction: There is a significant difference in job satisfaction among teachers in different counties in Hengyang City. Due to low salary, limited career development opportunities, high work pressure, low social recognition, and inconvenient living conditions, the job satisfaction of rural middle school English teachers is low. (Form 3)

In this survey and subsequent in-depth interviews, rural middle school English teachers in Hengyang City clearly expressed their needs, which are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.2.6. Government Support: The government should increase attention to and support for rural middle school English teachers, provide more professional training opportunities, preferential policies for title evaluation, etc., to encourage them to actively participate in various training activities and promote their professional development.

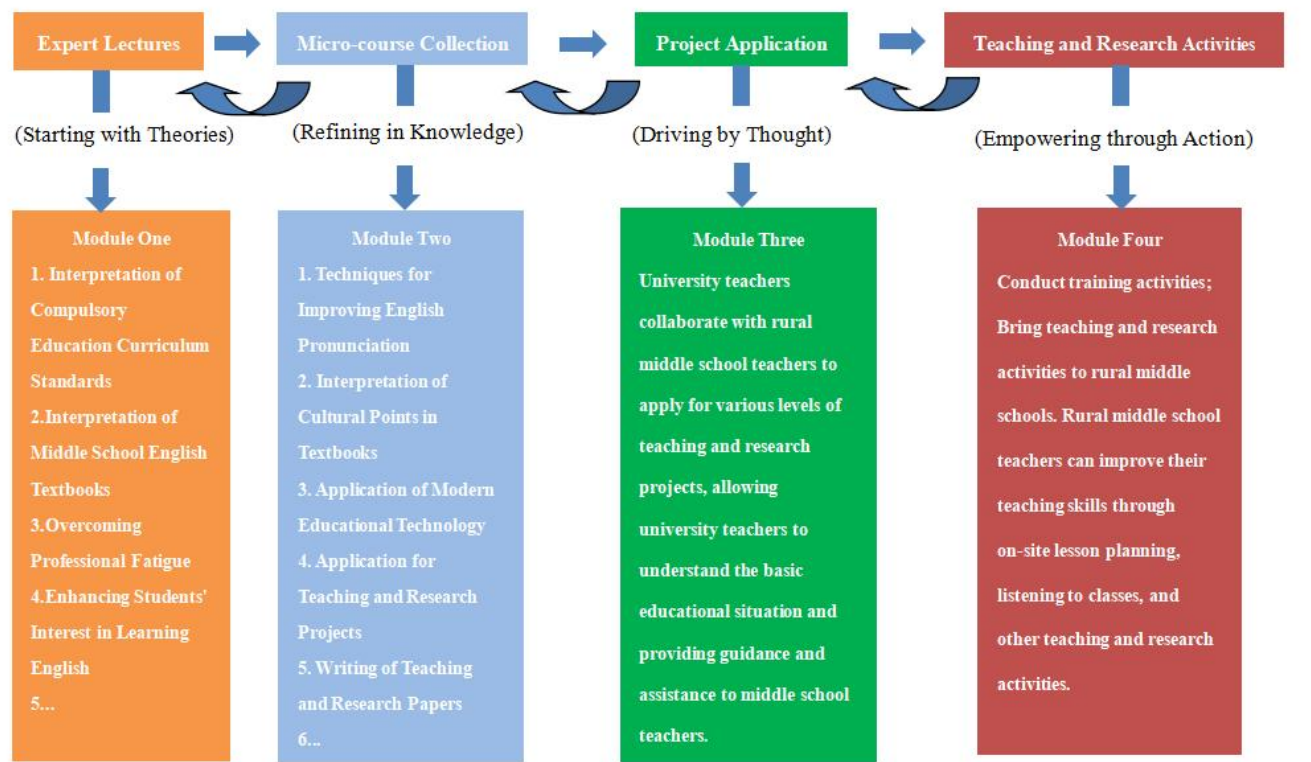
2.2.7. Access to University Resources: Universities can provide online training courses and teaching resources database platforms for rural middle school English teachers through online education platforms, sharing the latest subject knowledge and teaching methods.

2.2.8. Participation in Inter-school Exchanges: More inter-school classroom observation and teaching seminars and other cooperative and exchange activities should be organized to help rural middle school English teachers share teaching experience and achieve professional development through participation in such activities.

III. Construction and Practice of the Professional Development Support Service System for Rural Middle School English Teachers

It is of great significance and importance for normal universities, as the cradle of teacher training, to participate in the

training of rural middle school English teachers (Zuo Chongliang, 2021). This can not only optimize the allocation of resources and improve the professional quality of teachers but also make up for the shortcomings of rural middle school English education and promote balanced educational development. Against this backdrop, our team promoted and established the "Hengyang Normal University Middle School English Teaching and Research Center." The center was jointly established by Hengyang Normal University, Hengyang No. 8 Middle School, Hengyang Educational Research Institute, and Hengyang Chengzhang Middle School under the care and strong support of the Hunan Provincial Educational Research Institute and Hengyang Education Bureau. In combination with the professional development needs of rural middle school English teachers, the center has constructed a professional development support service system for rural middle school English teachers and carried out effective work, making due contributions to the development of English subject basic education in the districts and counties of Hengyang City.



Form 4: Rural Middle School English Teacher Professional Development Support Service Project System

The above figure shows the four modules of the professional development support service system for rural middle school English teachers. They are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, jointly promoting the professional growth of teachers. The detailed relationships between these four modules are as follows:

Firstly, the figure illustrates the logical progression among the four modules:

Expert lectures serve as the starting point of the system, providing teachers with the theoretical foundations and cutting-edge concepts of education and teaching, stimulating their intrinsic motivation. For example, through experts' interpretation of curriculum standards, teachers can clarify their teaching direction, laying the foundation for subsequent micro-course learning and teaching practice.

Inspired by the expert lectures, teachers can select different micro-courses for learning based on their needs. The micro-course section focuses on practical educational teaching skills, which form the basis for subsequent project applications and teaching and research activities. For instance, after understanding different teaching concepts and methods in expert lectures, teachers can learn specific implementation skills through micro-courses.

After being guided by experts and learning from micro-courses, the collaboration between university teachers and middle school teachers in project applications will promote teachers' in-depth involvement in educational research and teaching, which in turn benefits teaching practice. For example, teachers apply the skills learned in micro-courses to teaching practice, identify problems in practice, and then apply for projects to explore solutions to teaching problems in collaboration with university teachers.

As the reflection and improvement link of the system, teaching and research activities allow teachers to apply what they have learned in actual education and teaching under the guidance of expert lectures, the accumulation of micro-course learning, and the promotion of project research. Through communication and reflection, teachers continuously optimize their educational teaching methods and improve the quality of education and teaching.

In addition to the logical progression among the modules, the four modules also have different focuses in knowledge transmission, ability cultivation, and resource sharing, forming a complete chain:

Expert lectures provide theoretical knowledge, micro-course collections refine it into practical educational teaching skills, project applications promote the resolution of problems in educational teaching practice, and teaching and research activities focus on the sharing and reflection of educational teaching experience, forming a complete chain of knowledge transmission and application.

Expert lectures enhance cognitive abilities, micro-course collections strengthen teaching skills, project applications cultivate problem-solving abilities, and teaching and research activities improve communication and reflection abilities. The four modules comprehensively promote the improvement of teachers' abilities and professional growth.

Expert lectures share cutting-edge concepts in educational teaching, micro-course collections provide a variety of educational teaching resources, project applications promote cooperation and resource sharing between university teachers and middle school teachers, and teaching and research activities drive the generation and dissemination of collective wisdom, constructing a rich educational teaching resource support system.

At the same time, the four modules also form a perfect closed loop in mutual promotion.

The results of teaching and research activities can promote the continuous adjustment of the content of expert lectures and the continuous updating of micro-course resources, making subsequent support more in line with teachers' needs. The projects and results of collaborative applications can also provide new topics for expert lectures and micro-course production, promoting the continuous optimization of the support service system.

The above four modules form an organic whole. From theory to practice, from knowledge renewal to skill improvement, from individual learning to team research, they can comprehensively promote the professional growth of rural middle school English teachers, thereby promoting the improvement of rural education quality.

After constructing the professional development support service system for rural middle school English teachers, the center carried out the following series of activities:

3.1. Professional Cultivation to Support Rural Teachers' Career Development

By inviting experts in relevant fields to hold online and offline academic lectures, sending training to counties, and holding teaching and research salons, the center provides professional knowledge cultivation for rural middle school English teachers in different regions, covering English teaching methods, English pronunciation correction, humanities knowledge, modern educational technology, etc. This enhances their professional quality and lays a solid foundation for the improvement of teaching level and teaching and research capabilities of rural middle school English teachers.

3.2. Careful Guidance to Lead Middle School English Teaching and Education

University teachers jointly research, refine, and evaluate courses with middle school teachers, and carefully create high-standard demonstration classes. They also provide comprehensive guidance for middle school teachers participating in large-scale middle school English teaching competitions at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. Through these activities, teachers' teaching levels are improved, and middle school English teaching and education are led.

3.3. Team Formation to Collaboratively Conduct Basic Education Research

Under the organization and guidance of the Educational Research Institute, university teachers and middle school teachers form teams to jointly apply for various basic education research projects, collaborate in writing academic papers, or compile academic works (textbooks), etc., to promote teaching through research.

3.4. Collaborative Development to Build a Teaching Resource Network Platform

University teachers and middle school English teachers collaborate to research and develop a series of micro-courses, audio, text, and other teaching resources with independent intellectual property rights. They also continuously update and improve the "Excellent Middle School English Education and Teaching Case Database of Hengyang Normal University" (<http://anli.hynu.cn/>), which assists middle school English teaching practice and serves middle school English teachers in Hengyang City and all students majoring in English at Hengyang Normal University.

The construction of the professional development support service system for rural middle school English teachers has solved a series of problems. From "starting with belief," "excelling in knowledge," to "promoting thinking," and "assisting action," it can comprehensively support the professional development of rural English teachers. The activities carried out by the Hengyang Normal University Middle School English Teaching and Research Center based on this system have achieved the following good results:

The support service project system requires the provision of a combination of focused and diverse specialized training. By moving the venues of teaching and research activities from urban areas to rural middle schools, rural English teachers are able to participate and experience these activities on site. This has greatly stimulated the teachers' enthusiasm for participation, demonstrating a high level of learning passion and awareness of professional development.

The school-based "Hengyang Normal University Excellent Middle School English Teaching and Education Case Library" platform has been continuously updated and improved. Through this platform, teaching materials such as lesson plans, multimedia courseware, teaching videos, humanities knowledge, and various micro-lessons are shared. This allows rural middle school English teachers to access teaching resources on demand without leaving their homes, laying a solid foundation for the enhancement of teaching quality.

Through expert lectures, micro-course production, project applications, and teaching and research activities, rural middle school English teachers have acquired the latest educational theories and practical knowledge, and have mastered more teaching strategies and methods. This has led to a significant improvement in the professional level and teaching capabilities of rural English teachers.

The specific implementation of various projects in this system has positively impacted teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Teachers have created more vibrant teaching environments in their practice and applied the latest teaching strategies and methods, leading to noticeable improvements in students' academic performance.

IV. Conclusion

The professional development support service system for rural middle school English teachers provides a scientifically sound and rational design concept and approach for support service projects. It is a multi-party cooperation-based support service system for the professional development of rural teachers, integrating resources and strengths from universities, governments, educational research institutes, and middle schools to enhance the professional capabilities and teaching quality of rural teachers. After three years of practice, this support service system has significantly increased participation in teaching and research activities, enriched the content of the teaching resource platform day by day, and improved the professional development level of rural middle school English teachers as well as the academic performance of students, through methods such as organizing online and offline expert lectures according to needs, conducting teaching and research activities in rural middle schools, forming teams to collaborate on basic education research, and improving the online resource platform.

To better support the professional development of rural teachers, our team suggests that the following aspects should be noted in the implementation of the above support service projects: demand orientation is key, training forms must be diverse, resource platforms should be improved, teaching research should be collaborative, and project operations should be evaluated. By continuously improving and perfecting the different modules of the support service projects, the operational effectiveness of this support service system will be further enhanced, thereby promoting the comprehensive development of basic education in rural English subjects, and at the same time, providing valuable references for the professional development of teachers in other disciplines and educational stages.

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