

The Multiple Dimensions of Rural Teachers' Professional Emotional Development from a Symbiotic Perspective

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Abstract: The professional emotional development of rural teachers is essentially a dynamic practice of life, culture, and education in symbiosis. From a symbiotic perspective, this study reveals the unique connotations of rural teachers' professional emotions, characterized by local attachment, dialectical identity, and community dependency. Achieving the ideal development of rural teachers' professional emotions requires overcoming emotional predicaments such as resource scarcity and role overload, urban-rural divides and cultural suspension, fractured support and self-alienation. The developmental path ultimately points toward emotional practices of symbiosis—with nature, with the community, with culture, and with the self.

Keywords: Symbiosis; Rural Teachers; Professional Emotions

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1. Introduction

Symbiosis is a cultural need for individual development^[1] and also the foundation for rural teachers' emotional identity. The emotional identity of rural teachers is not only a matter of personal choice but is also rooted in the symbiotic system of "people–place–culture." Rural teachers are both inheritors of local culture and practitioners of modern education; their professional emotions inherently carry the complex demands of community connection, cultural continuity, and self-actualization. The emotional development of rural teachers is by no means a one-dimensional psychological adjustment but rather a process of self-affirmation within multiple relational networks as cultural beings. The symbiotic state of humanity is inseparable from human self-consciousness; that is, symbiosis is a product of human self-need, a result of self-seeking^[2]. Therefore, the professional perseverance of rural teachers is essentially an active pursuit of life's meaning. As rural teachers face multiple challenges—intensified urban-rural cultural conflicts exacerbating professional identity anxiety, emotional labor overload leading to psychological exhaustion, lack of social support causing a sense of belonging loss—focusing on their emotional development constitutes care for the life value of the teacher community. It is a crucial response to efforts aimed at developing fair and quality rural education by fostering a high-quality teaching force passionate about rural areas. So-called "symbiotic education" addresses, among other issues, the formation of a symbiotic and complementary system between human growth and the healthy development of its external world^[3]. This aligns perfectly with the ultimate path for rural teachers' professional emotions, making the examination of their emotional development from a symbiotic perspective research-significant.

2. What Are Teachers' Professional Emotions: Why Should They Develop?

For rural teachers, their professional emotions are deeply coupled with the rural ecology—within a symbiotic field of natural immersion, cultural inheritance, and community interaction, they exhibit unique characteristics of local attachment, dialectical identity, and support dependency. These qualities are not only the spiritual bond for the sustainable development of rural education but also the core dimension for reconstructing teachers' life meaning.

2.1 What Are Teachers' Professional Emotions

Emotion is the attitudinal experience an individual holds towards things they know or operate, triggered by whether needs are met ^[4]. It is the internal attitudinal experience in various forms towards events in one's life or things known or done ^[5]. The commonality of emotions lies in being an internal experience of the individual, a psychological state. Professional emotion, then, refers to the relatively stable emotional experiences and attitudinal reactions formed by an individual in specific professional activities, encompassing the organic unity of professional

identity, value judgments, and behavioral tendencies. For teachers, the development of professional emotion is not simple emotion management but a deep life awakening that transcends the dimension of knowledge and skills. It points towards teachers' cognitive reconstruction of the essence of education, the internalization of the value of their professional mission, and the transformation of emotional energy and elevation of spiritual state achieved in this process. As Ma Duoxiu argues, "Emotion is an important dimension of human spiritual growth, an external representation of the overall human spiritual condition, and also an important indicator of one's attitude towards life"^[6]. This echoes Professor Ye Lan's proposition that besides teaching and educating others, teachers must also "educate themselves", viewing the pursuit and realization of creation as "the source of the inner dignity and joy of the teaching profession"^[7]. Teachers' professional emotion is the value identity and emotional identity towards the teaching role formed through professional activities—a relatively stable emotional experience and attitudinal reaction closely related to an individual's sense of identity. As Zhang Yizhong emphasizes, teachers' professional emotion is the stable attitudinal experience teachers have regarding whether the teaching profession meets their needs and satisfies their inner emotional demands^[8]. Rural teachers' professional emotion falls under this broader category; thus, it also refers to the stable emotional experiences and attitudes formed by rural teachers in their educational and teaching activities, involving the resulting behavioral expressions. However, due to the rural context of their work, rural teachers' professional emotions also possess some unique characteristics. Living and working immersed in local culture, the experiences accumulated under the influence of rural social norms and values become the schema guiding rural teachers in understanding the world, judging things, and behavior^[9].

2.2 Characteristics of Rural Teachers' Professional Emotions

Compared with urban areas, rural regions hold unique geographical and cultural characteristics, giving rural education strong local traits. The deep rural atmosphere endows rural teachers with distinctive emotional features.

Local Cultural Attachment. Culturally, rural teachers are core bearers of rural education—knowledge transmitters and local culture inheritors. Their localized practices root education in locality, granting them professional value and cultural identity. This symbiosis sustains rural society. Influenced by agricultural heritage, history, and folk customs, their emotions couple with rural culture, forming locally-imprinted values. Their role shifts between knowledge disseminator and cultural practitioner, shaping identity within local context. Emotional expressions aligning with local atmosphere resonate with rural society's needs, making their emotions part of socio-cultural structure. Stability depends on adaptation/identification with local culture.

Duality of Professional Identity. Rural teachers' identity often wavers between urban and rural spheres—lacking full rural belonging yet yearning for urban amenities. As intellectual elites, they are cultural leaders enjoying high status, but compared to urban teachers, environmental, economic, and evaluative differences cause identity anxiety. This duality creates emotional volatility: valuing achievement (e.g., student growth) yet facing frustration from disadvantaged status. It may yield strong commitment or identity fracture from resource imbalances. This tension is growth opportunity: transforming "urban standards chasing" into "local value deepening" can reconstruct meaning via "guarding land" and "pioneering new," moving from "survival anxiety" to "life narrative".

Community Dependency for Emotional Support. Their emotions rely heavily on community support. Societies comprise hierarchical sub-fields with own logics ^[10]; rural teachers depend on community life. Close-knit networks source and stabilize their emotions. Interactions with parents, village, and culture shape professional experience. Material exchanges (e.g., gifts, repairs) reflect deep emotional ties. Community activities (e.g., festivals, museums) turn knowledge impartation into cultural dialogue, validating their value in "teacher-parent-village" networks. As community members, harmonious relationships and positive feedback nurture professional emotions. Respect, recognition, and identification incentivize belonging/value. Conversely, expectation-growth gaps or lack of support lead to detachment. Support includes material security and socio-cultural respect, directly affecting emotional stability.

3.The Trajectory of Rural Teachers' Professional Emotions: Decline or Fulfillment?

Rural teachers face unique contradictions in their emotional growth: on one hand, their professional characteristics require them to be guardians of local culture and emotional bonds; on the other hand, practical difficulties often force them into a crisis of emotional "withering." Due to structural differences in rural social environments, educational resources, and career development opportunities, rural teachers have professional emotional needs distinct from those of their urban counterparts.

3.1 The Ideal Realization of Rural Teachers' Professional Emotions

The ideal state of teachers' professional emotional development is a harmony of emotional abundance and professional mission. Teachers should experience achievement and satisfaction in their work, while receiving support from society, family, and their professional community. In this state, they can fully realize self-worth and channel positive emotions back into teaching and students, creating a virtuous cycle. Moreover, teachers must maintain emotional stability through effective regulation techniques under pressure, preventing decline due to stress or negative social influences. Ma Guoqing proposes that "people are the core of rural cultural revitalization," and the ideal rural teacher serves as a "cultural intermediary"—guiding students with modern educational concepts while integrating local wisdom. For instance, a Yunnan teacher designed a math lesson using terrace farming, helping students grasp geometry through land measurement while achieving both emotional and professional growth. Attaining this ideal requires addressing rural teachers' specific emotional needs.

First, rural teachers have a stronger need for professional identity. Within the urban–rural educational duality, they often face "value depreciation"—factors like uneven student quality, poor facilities, and low social recognition diminish their sense of worth. Unlike urban teachers who benefit from established systems, rural teachers must build a deeper educational mission, elevating teaching into conscious cultural transmission to sustain professional meaning.

Second, cultural belonging is more critical for rural teachers. While urban teachers' emotions often align with professional development, rural teachers' emotional roots lie in local culture. In close-knit communities, they act not only as knowledge transmitters but also as cultural coordinators and value integrators. For example, a Guangxi teacher collaborated with parents to create local teaching materials during festivals, strengthening cultural ties and reshaping a localized identity. This embeddedness requires transcending instrumental roles to become emotional hubs in rural society.

Third, rural teachers have a more urgent need for social support. Urban teachers access diverse networks like professional communities and public services, whereas rural teachers often depend on fragile school and family ties. When communities hollow out or home-school communication fails, teachers face isolation. Institutionalized emotional care is thus essential for their well-being.

However, reality often contradicts this ideal. Limited resources force teachers into multiple roles; excessive workloads curb emotional expression; societal support often focuses on material donations, overlooking emotional needs; and weakened professional identity leads to "instrumentalization," reducing teaching to mere tasks rather than life interaction. Worse, prolonged self-neglect leads to burnout and loss of meaning. These challenges form an "emotional shackle" requiring systematic support to break.

3.2 Tracing the Sources of Rural Teachers' Professional Emotional Dilemmas

The unresolved professional emotional needs of rural teachers become obstacles on their path to well-being. The professional emotional dilemmas of rural teachers stem from the interaction of multiple factors.

First, they face heavy workloads. Long-term multi-grade and multi-subject teaching, combined with administrative duties and standardized assessments, creates sustained pressure that obstructs emotional growth. Beyond teaching, they also assume non-institutionalized roles such as cultural mediation and home-school communication. Limited resources and weak faculty strength further reduce visible outcomes, leaving teachers with

diminished achievement and emotional overload.

Second, rural teachers' multiple identities intensify pressure. According to Bourdieu's theory of practice, when capital investment is mismatched with returns, actors experience value crises. Rural teachers' specialized labor is often reduced to a symbolically devalued "low-skilled service," weakening professional identity. Experienced teachers struggle with existential anxiety as local education deteriorates, while younger ones feel torn between aspirations for urban mobility and moral responsibility to remain. High turnover worsens instability, eroding collective identity. Marginalization within the education system is evident in limited promotion, training, and recognition, which amplifies their sense of neglect and stagnation.

Third, cultural belonging has declined. Earlier generations of teachers were locally rooted, their identity bound to land and tradition. With urbanization and systemic changes, fewer teachers now come from rural areas, often perceived as "geographical" or "cultural outsiders." Younger teachers lean toward urban lifestyles, while older teachers feel their cultural role fading. The clash between rural and urban values undermines integration, leaving many unable to form stable belonging or professional dignity.

Finally, weak support systems aggravate emotional strain. Rural hollowing-out erodes mutual aid networks, leaving teachers to handle complex issues—such as left-behind children's psychological crises—largely alone. Institutional support remains campaign-like and unsustainable, reducing self-care to mere physiological maintenance. Emotion management often degenerates into suppression and isolation. Prolonged overdraft eventually depletes creativity and deepens alienation, turning teachers from "cultural agents" into standardized cogs, their emotions regressing from symbiotic vitality to cold instrumental rationality.

These dilemmas essentially reveal the ontological crisis of rural teachers as cultural intermediaries in the process of modernization. Their combined effect often manifests as emotional fatigue, job burnout, and ultimately leads to emotional isolation—a psychological detachment from the professional environment, reluctance to establish deep emotional connections with students, colleagues, and the community. Resolving the emotional dilemmas of rural teachers requires reconstructing an educational ecology that symbiotically integrates "nature–society–culture–self." Only then can rural teachers transcend "survival anxiety" and achieve the full blossoming of their lives within professional practice.

4. Toward Symbiotic Practices of Rural Teachers' Emotions

Symbiotic education is a "practical paradigm". If it remains only at the level of concepts and conditions, symbiotic education cannot be transformed into a realistic force that influences and changes human education. It is necessary to turn concepts into practice. ^[12] This logic is in line with the development path of professional emotions of rural teachers. The emotional practice of rural teachers should focus on how to achieve the adjustment, development and transcendence of emotions in multiple dimensions such as nature, society, culture and self-identity.

4.1 Symbiosis with Nature: From Life Dependence to Emotional Resonance

The professional emotions of rural teachers are deeply shaped by the natural environment. Amid accelerating urbanization, the countryside—with its purity, slower pace, and human warmth—offers modern people a renewed sense of existence. For some, including rural teachers, "returning to the countryside" has become a spiritual pursuit. The rural landscape serves not only as a teaching resource but also as a space for emotional healing. For example, a primary school teacher in Guangxi guided students to observe insects in rice fields, turning farming into a biology lesson. In this process, the teacher rediscovered reverence for the land, while students learned that "every grain comes from hard work." Such practices awaken teachers' emotional bond with nature and cultivate resilience. When teachers treat nature as a "symbiotic partner" rather than an "object to be conquered," teaching transcends knowledge delivery and becomes a dialogue of life. Through long-term practice, rural teachers develop not passive adaptation but an active symbiosis with nature, which provides both material environment and psychological support for emotional regulation. The cyclical stability of the rural environment helps teachers adjust emotions in rhythm,

shaping deeper professional identity. From geographical dependence to value resonance, the symbiosis between teachers and nature reshapes the logic of rural education. Thus, the emotional development of rural teachers is neither romantic imagination nor mere survival strategy, but a new paradigm of education grounded in continuous dialogue with life.

4.2. Symbiosis with Rural Society: From Community Embeddedness to Cultural Sharing

The growth of rural teachers' professional emotions is deeply affected by the symbiotic relationships within rural society. The close-knit interpersonal networks in the countryside determine that teachers' emotional experiences are not only derived from internal psychological accumulation but are also continuously constructed through social interactions. "No one can exist apart from others; we always enrich and construct the meaning of self-formation through sensing others. Others are the fundamental basis for individuals to understand and construct the self; they form the horizon of individual development"^[13]. In the structure of rural society, teachers similarly cannot separate from the care of others, which is particularly evident in their handling of community relationships. The role of teachers has multiple attributes: they are not only knowledge disseminators but also members of the rural community, and in some cases, they even undertake multiple functions such as social governance and cultural bridging. This uniqueness means that the emotional development of rural teachers inevitably relies on community symbiosis. Therefore, the development of teachers' professional emotions necessarily depends on the emotional support system provided by the community. This support is reflected not only in the rational distribution of material resources but also in warm interpersonal interactions, community recognition, and enhanced professional respect. This two-way interaction between teachers and the rural community not only reshapes the educational ecology of rural society but also provides social soil for teachers' emotional growth. The embeddedness in rural society makes teachers' emotional experiences more susceptible to the influence of social networks, and the feedback from the rural community on teachers' professional emotions is often immediate and direct. This characteristic necessitates that teachers continuously adjust their adaptation strategies to social relationships during their professional emotional growth to form a stable sense of professional belonging and psychological security.

4.3 Symbiosis with Culture: From Cultural Inheritance to Value Innovation

The professional emotional growth of rural teachers is closely tied to the inheritance and innovation of rural culture. Ma Guoqing emphasizes that cultural symbiosis must guide educational choices, as only then can culture prosper and civilization endure^[11]. The spirit of rural education rests on three levels: rooting in the countryside, adhering to educational essence, and sustaining cultural lifeblood. Rural culture serves both as the spiritual foundation of society and a cornerstone of teachers' professional emotions. In this environment, emotions are shaped by tradition while also influenced by modern cultural shifts.

In terms of cultural inheritance, teachers must locate their emotional identity within rural values, making their professional experience both personal growth and cultural mission. In terms of cultural innovation, they must balance tradition and modernity, inheriting local culture while integrating new educational concepts. This enables them to achieve emotional fulfillment and stronger professional identity in practice.

Cultural symbiosis thus means more than adaptation; it is the capacity to anchor professional emotions amid cultural change and draw deeper support from practice. As Liu Tiefang notes, teaching must awaken life consciousness. When teachers inspire students' creativity through cultural practices, their own spiritual world is enriched. This process not only transmits tradition but also grants teachers cultural agency, allowing them to realize professional meaning through value innovation.

4.4 Symbiosis with Self: From Emotional Awareness to Inner Transcendence

In the dimension of self-symbiosis, the professional emotional growth of rural teachers ultimately culminates in self-awareness and inner transcendence, achieving the wholeness of a teacher's life. Liu Tiefang argues that education, with fostering individuals as its fundamental mission, ought to undertake the cultivation of life

emotions^[14]. Education cannot and should not abandon its concern for the emotional lives of individuals. As a crucial component of education, teachers' self-emotions and life experiences also deserve attention. Li Zhengtao similarly believes that the essence of pedagogy lies in uncovering and highlighting the value and significance of the unique, irreplaceable life forms of every being in the educational world (including teachers' passion), showcasing the existence of life to the world^[15]. Professional emotion is not only a result of external environmental influences but also a reflection of the teacher's inner spiritual world. In the context of rural education, teachers often face professional challenges such as low social recognition, limited career development, and heavy workloads. These practical challenges demand stronger emotional regulation skills to avoid emotional exhaustion and professional burnout. The professional emotional growth of rural teachers requires continuous self-reflection, self-adjustment, and self-motivation to achieve a shift from external dependence to internal drive. In this process, teachers need to establish stable professional beliefs and cultural identity, enabling them to develop a lasting sense of professional mission through long-term educational practice. Self-symbiosis not only means that teachers can adapt to the rural educational environment but also signifies their ability to achieve profound growth in professional emotions, making teaching not just a professional task but an important pathway to self-realization.

5. Conclusion

The philosophy of symbiosis reveals that emotional growth is rooted in the interdependence between self and others. For rural teachers, professional emotion develops through interactions with nature, society, culture, and self. Revitalizing rural education requires revitalizing the emotional and spiritual state of teachers. When teachers rediscover reverence through nature, reconstruct belonging in communities, affirm value through culture, and realize self-growth, their emotions transcend survival anxiety and evolve into cultural consciousness. Thus, rural teachers become the resilient cultural roots of rural revitalization—nurturing both the land's future and their own poetic dwelling of life.

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