

Research on Career Education for Rural Primary and Secondary School Students Based on Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The dilemma of career education for rural primary and secondary students attribute to the long-term huge gap of educational resources between urban and rural areas in China. To address this issue, this study uses Waduo Township in Yuxi City, Yunnan Province as the empirical research area, employing the grounded theory research method to construct a model of influencing factors for career education among rural primary and secondary students. The study finds that career education for rural primary and secondary school students is influenced by four main categories: family factors as the fundamental cause, school factors as the direct cause, student factors as the resulting effect, and social factors as a cumulative influence; among these, the lack and insufficient transformation of family cultural capital is the core mechanism that restricts rural students' career awareness and planning.

Keywords

Rural primary and secondary students; career education; grounded theory; influencing factors; family cultural capital

1. Introduction

Education is the ladder of civilization progress, and it has always been a decisive factor in the development of a nation and society since antiquity[1]. Governors in various dynasties have placed great importance on education. Nowadays with the deepening globalization of the economy, rapid advancements in technology, and increasing international competition, knowledge has become a decisive factor in enhancing comprehensive national power and international competitiveness. Human resources are increasingly regarded as a strategic resource for promoting economic and social development. The foundational, guiding, and comprehensive role of education is becoming more pronounced. Ultimately, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation rely on talent. The foundation of talent cultivation is education, which is

a fundamental way to enhance the ideological and moral quality and scientific and cultural quality of the people, and is the basic engineering for developing science and technology and nurturing talent[2]. Vigorously developing education is an inevitable choice for leveraging China's human resource advantages, building an innovative country, and accelerating the promotion of socialist modernization.

With the rapid economic growth in our country in recent years, people's living standards have improved, yet the unbalanced regional development of the economy has increasingly become evident. The economy serves as the basis for human society's survival and development. A certain economic level provides conditions for education. The level of economic development, as the material basis for educational development, also determines the extent of differences in educational development[3].

2. Definition of Related Concepts

2.1. Cultural Capital

The ideologist Bourdieu argued that education in Western capitalist countries serves as a site for class reproduction and a mechanism for perpetuating social inequality. Rather than promoting equality, education functions to maintain existing disparities. The field of education is an arena where various forms of capital are exchanged and power struggles unfold. Key concepts in Bourdieu's sociology of education include class, power, and cultural capital.

Bourdieu's sociological theory reveals four hidden truths in educational activities: To begin with, cultural capital significantly influences educational equity, including access to education. Disadvantaged backgrounds often lead to fewer learning opportunities and resources, primarily due to a lack of economic capital, which hinders educational investment in children.

Additionally, socioeconomic status greatly affects academic achievement. Bourdieu contended that the expansion of higher education has not broken the specific structures of social class but has instead reinforced them. Educational equity is a crucial indicator of social justice and must be addressed effectively. It encompasses equal opportunities and equal rights, serving as the foundation of social equity and a core value and goal of modern education. The ultimate aim of educational equity is collective development, prosperity, and well-being, with equal access to education being its central concern in contemporary society.

Besides, the amount of cultural capital a family possesses influences students' choices of majors. Students from impoverished backgrounds in western countries are more inclined to choose practical fields such as engineering, while elite disciplines like philosophy and sociology, which require high linguistic capital, are often beyond their reach. Consequently, children from working-class or agricultural families seldom choose majors such as law or medicine, preferring more practical alternatives.

Last but not least, schools are not sacred “ivory towers” but battlegrounds for competing interests. Students from poor families often struggle to achieve higher academic success, giving rise to the saying that “it is hard for a poor family to produce a distinguished scholar.” Bourdieu also noted that the “ivory tower” represents an idealized societal expectation of schools. However, with the advent of post-industrial society, the sanctity of schools has been eroded by capital. Schools serve practical functions, such as facilitating employment, and are arenas of various interest conflicts and teachers are merely symbols. Therefore, education itself involves struggles for interest.

Bourdieu identified three functions of education: to internalize, to legalize, and externalize.

The internalizing function refers to school transmit specific knowledge or ideology to students through indoctrination and mystification, leading to self-internalization. This process emphasizes collective will transcend individual will, making it nearly impossible for students to develop individuality—a phenomenon exemplified by standardized school uniforms. Bourdieu argued that this approach aims to make students behaviorally identify with the cultural traditions of the ruling class.

The legitimizing function involves misidentification or diverting attention from the truth of social reproduction in education. Its purpose is to lead students into a state of unconscious acceptance.

The extrinsic function, in Bourdieu’s view, refers to education’s ultimate goal of reinforcing unequal resource distribution and solidifying or expanding class relations in society, primarily through examinations.

2.2. Educational Resources

Educational resources, also referred to as economic conditions of education, encompass the human, material, and financial resources occupied, utilized, and consumed in the process of education. In other words, they represent the sum of human, material, and financial resources dedicated to education. Educational resources serve as the fundamental guarantee and basic condition for developing and advancing the education sector. The allocation of educational resources refers to the process by which governments at various levels or other investment entities distribute their limited resources—including financial, material, human, and technological resources—through different channels, methods, and procedures to schools of various types and levels within a certain period, aiming to achieve optimal educational outcomes[4].

Insufficient finance has long been a critical issue hindering the development of rural compulsory education[5]. From the perspective of per-student educational expenditure, a key indicator, a “Matthew Effect” exists in the allocation of educational resources between urban and rural areas in China. Per-student educational expenditure is a fundamental measure of overall educational investment, accurately reflecting the provision of educational funds and the extent to which these funds

meet the needs of educational development. According to relevant statistics, in 2003, the average per-student public funding for urban primary and junior secondary schools was 106.07 yuan and 169.61 yuan, respectively, while the figures for rural primary and junior secondary schools were 60.91 yuan and 85.01 yuan, respectively. This means urban areas spent 1.74 times more than rural areas. In 2006, the national average per-student public expenditure for primary and junior secondary schools was 270.94 yuan and 378.42 yuan, respectively, whereas the figures for rural primary and junior secondary schools were 248.53 yuan and 346.05 yuan, respectively. These data indicate that, whether for primary or junior secondary education, the absolute amount of per-student expenditure in urban areas exceeded that in rural areas. Moreover, the average annual growth rate of per-student expenditure in urban areas was higher than in rural areas, leading to a continuously widening gap between urban and rural educational funding.

2.3. Rural Education

The focal issue of Chinese education lies in rural areas, and the core problem within rural education is teachers. It is self-evident that teachers are important in realizing educational quality. However, in terms of teacher stability and training, a pronounced "Matthew Effect" exists among regions and schools. Regarding stability, the phenomenon of "peacocks flying southeast"—referring to the outflow of talented individuals—has intensified, leading to a serious loss of outstanding teachers in rural areas. Teacher resources are increasingly flowing from western to eastern regions, from rural to urban areas, and from underdeveloped to developed regions. Over time, schools in developed areas have strengthened their teaching forces, and competition among teachers has become more intense. In contrast, schools in less developed areas face exacerbated teacher attrition, making educational development increasingly difficult and creating a vicious cycle[6].

The irrational mobility of rural teachers leads to several issues: Firstly, it results in an uneven distribution of excellent teachers between urban and rural areas. Secondly, it exacerbates the shortage of teachers in rural areas. Thirdly, it lowers the overall quality of the rural teaching workforce. Fourthly, it accelerates the dropout rate among rural primary and secondary school students. Furthermore, the "Matthew Effect" is also evident in teacher training. Various forms of training often focus on urban teachers who are already renowned, backbone, advanced, or model educators, while neglecting rural teachers who suffer from outdated knowledge, obsolete concepts, and poor professional competence. Teacher education funding tends to be allocated to those already distinguished. Urban teachers have more opportunities for training and further education, whereas rural teachers receive significantly fewer training opportunities compared to their urban counterparts. Over time, this leads to a situation where the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker, widening the gap between teachers and creating severe imbalances in both the quantity and quality of the teaching workforce[7].

Hardware facilities are the material foundation for the survival and development of schools, also an external manifestation of school conditions. To some extent, hardware facilities are the most visible aspect of the urban-rural disparity[8]. Whether in terms of school building structures, teaching equipment, or living conditions, rural educational facilities lag significantly behind those in urban areas. According to national standards, the total area of dilapidated buildings in rural primary and secondary schools in China still exceeds 22 million square meters. Additionally, the urban-rural gap in the per-student value of teaching instruments and equipment has continued to widen in over one-third of the country's regions. The urban-rural ratio of per-student teaching instrument value in primary schools has reached 2.9:1. The urban-rural gap in compulsory education is also evident in two key areas: the availability of teaching instruments and network infrastructure. Across basic school conditions—including sports facilities, equipment for PE/music/arts, science labs, and campus networks—rural schools consistently have lower compliance rates than urban schools.

3. Current State of Rural Education in Wadie Township

Wadie Township is located in the southeast of Yuxi City, Yunnan Province, at the junction of Yuanjiang, Shiping, and Honghe counties. It covers a total area of 329 square kilometers and has a population of 11,500 people. The township includes one community (Wadie Community) and six village committees (Tajike, Laochaji, Yicibei, Luodie, Tacaiji, and Yebai), comprising 97 villager groups and 64 natural villages. There are 1,032 registered poor households with 3,784 individuals. In 2020, the township was awarded the “Advanced Collective in Poverty Alleviation” by Yunnan Province for its significant achievements in poverty reduction. Wadie Village is 58 kilometers from the county seat.

The area suffers from severe rocky desertification and seasonal water shortages. Industrial development is weak, and residents mainly rely on planting cash crops such as tobacco, walnuts, mangoes, beans, and peppers, as well as livestock breeding. It is an old, ethnic, remote, and mountainous Yi community. The region features typical karst topography with high mountains, deep valleys, and serious rocky desertification. Limited arable land greatly restricts local agricultural production and economic development. Land remains the primary resource for increasing incomes. Major sources of farmer income include growing tobacco, sugarcane, and corn, as well as agricultural products like ham, air-cured tobacco, and sorghum liquor. The Xiaoadi River has a steep bed with large elevation drops, but the temperature and altitude are suitable for growing crops such as rice, corn, sweet potatoes, and tobacco.

The Yi ethnic people are the main ethnic group in Wadie. The township supports the training and preservation of Yi ethnic writing and embroidery traditions. It has developed ethnic clothing, dance, festival celebrations, and distinctive cuisine, turning

cultural resources into economic strengths and achieving notable social and economic benefits.

In 2020, Wadie Township passed a third-party evaluation of national targeted poverty alleviation efforts and received the provincial award for Outstanding Collective in Poverty Alleviation. Three local cadres and poverty reduction team members were also recognized as Provincial Advanced Individuals in Poverty Alleviation.

4. Theoretical Analysis and Model Construction

4.1. Research Method

This study uses the grounded theory approach. Proposed by American scholars Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, grounded theory is a qualitative research method. It emphasizes the process of collecting, organizing, analyzing, summarizing, and refining data to develop core theories, following a logical structure of “data collection-data analysis-theory formation.”

Given the contextual and practical nature of this research, grounded theory is adopted. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, encouraging respondents to share real experiences and opinions to ensure data authenticity and scientific rigor. During data collection and analysis, theoretical elements were extracted using a three-level coding process (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding). Key categories were summarized, and a core category was identified, leading to a scientific and systematic model of factors influencing career education for rural primary and secondary school students.

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 22 villagers, students, and rural teachers in Wadie Township, conducted over five days. A total of 10,000 words of transcripts were collected (see Table 1 for interviewee demographics).

Table 1. basic information of interviewees

Last Name	Age	Occupation
Yang	27	Village Official
Hua	38	Guest House's Owner
Huang	43	Farmer
He	40	Self Employed
He	12	Sixth Grader
Bai	12	Sixth Grader
Bai	12	Sixth Grader
Yang	12	Sixth Grader
Zhao	13	Sixth Grader
Yang	12	Sixth Grader
Yang	12	Sixth Grader
Yang	11	Sixth Grader
Zhang	10	Fifth Grader
Li	8	Second Grader
Zhao	10	Fourth grader
Che	44	Teacher
Tan	26	Teacher

Bai	46	Teacher
Yang	14	Second year student of Secondary school
Li	14	Second year student of Secondary school
Long	13	First year student of Secondary school
Bai	13	First year student of Secondary school

4.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study. Example questions for primary and secondary school students included: What are your parents' expectations for your future career? Do you understand what your parents do for work? Do you like that type of job? Do teachers at school introduce different professions to you?

Example questions for rural teachers included: In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges students face in their current stage of learning? From a future development perspective, what support do students lack the most? Are you familiar with or have you been exposed to career awareness education? What are your views on introducing career awareness education at this stage? Does your school emphasize career awareness education for students? Are there clear goals? What methods has your school used to implement career awareness education? What is the current situation?

Example questions for villagers included: Are you familiar with or have you been exposed to career awareness education? What do you think about introducing career awareness education at this stage? What factors are most important to you when considering your child's future career choices? Have you discussed future careers with your child? Does your family have conversations about this topic? What are your educational expectations for your child?

In addition to following the prepared outline, the researcher adjusted interview directions and questions based on respondents' answers, encouraging open expression to ensure the collection of authentic and accurate information.

4.3. Coding Process of Interview Data

4.3.1. Open Coding

Open coding requires the researcher to maintain an open mindset and minimize personal bias, coding the data according to its original presentation. It is a process of breaking down collected information, assigning concepts, and then reorganizing it in new ways. During the open coding phase, each interview transcript was analyzed line by line. Initial concepts were identified from raw statements, conceptual categories were recognized and labeled, and higher-level categories were formed through comparison, refinement, and integration of these concepts (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2. Initial Categories Formed Through Open Coding

ID	Initial Domain	ID	Initial Domain
1	Online Celebrities	12	Secession from Rural life

2	Gratitude Education	13	Lack of Horizons
3	Lack of Family Custody	14	Economic Hardships of Family
4	Lack of Hardware Equipment	15	Weak Cognition of Parents
5	Weak Knowledge Foundation	16	Weak Effects of Lessons for Career Planning
6	Interest Group	17	Inclines of Vocational Schools
7	Single Parent Family	18	Influence of Online Trends
8	Anticipation of Stable Work	19	Left-behind Children
9	Short Videos and Social Media	20	Plans of High schools
10	Fast changes of vocational thoughts	21	Students' lack of experiences
11	Yi Ethnic Group's culture	22	Agricultural Production

4.3.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding further integrates, refines, and synthesizes the initial concepts and categories obtained from open coding to form main categories and establish connections among them, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and coherence of the categorical meanings. Analysis of Table 2 reveals certain inherent logical relationships among the 20 categories generated during open coding in this study, along with other relevant categories. Through systematic synthesis, the following four main categories were ultimately formed (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Process and Results of Axial Coding

Initial Domain	Result of Axial Coding
Implementing gratitude education, lack of hardware equipment, interest groups, career classes are ineffective, high school planning, teachers lack experience.	Factor of School
Lack of family supervision, single-parent families, expectations for stable jobs, economic difficulties at home, insufficient parental awareness, left-behind children, inclination towards vocational schools, Yi ethnic culture, agricultural production, family factors.	Factor of Family
Weak knowledge base, rapid changes in career ideas, and students lack experience.	Factor of School
Internet idols, short videos and social software, breaking away from rural life, influenced by online popular content.	Factor of Social

4.3.3. Selective Coding

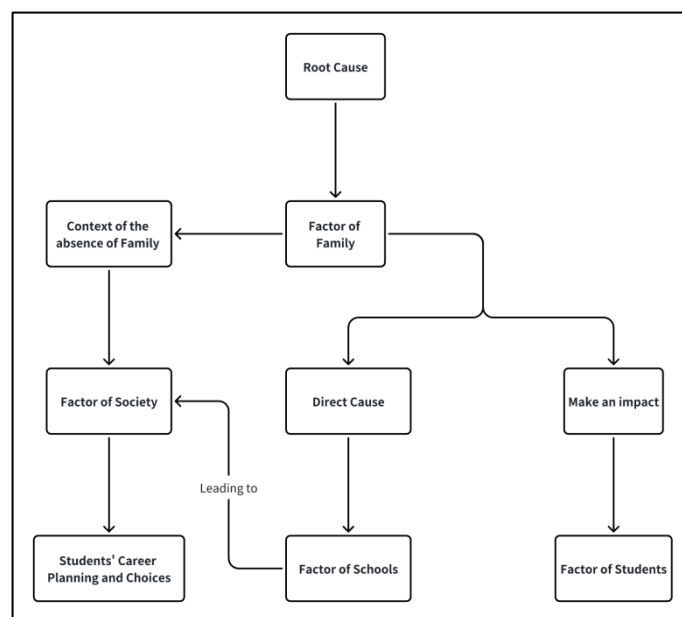
Selective coding involves systematically analyzing existing conceptual categories to identify a "core category" that can logically connect other categories into a coherent network through inherent relationships, thereby forming an overarching theoretical framework.

During the axial coding phase, this study identified four main categories: school factors, family factors, student factors, and social factors. Through in-depth analysis of the interview data, the study centered on the core category of "factors influencing career education for rural primary and secondary school students," clarifying the relationships between the core category and sub-categories.

Family factors--such as lack of parental supervision, single-parent households, expectations for stable government jobs, financial difficulties, and limited parental awareness--are the root causes of weaknesses in career education for these students. These lead to student factors, including weak foundational knowledge, rapidly

changing career aspirations, and limited exposure. School factors—such as the implementation of gratitude education, interest clubs, and ineffective career classes—act as direct contributing causes. Against the backdrop of inadequate family support and ineffective school education, social factors—such as internet celebrities, short videos and social media, content disconnected from rural life, and the influence of online trends—further shape the career perspectives of rural students.

Figure 1. The Influencing Factors Model of Career Education for Rural Primary and Secondary School Students



4.3.4. Theoretical Saturation Test

This study conducted a theoretical saturation test using two randomly reserved interview transcripts. The results showed that the categories were well-developed, and no new categories or relationships beyond the four main categories were identified. Therefore, the study concluded that the model of factors influencing career education for rural primary and secondary school students, developed through grounded theory, has reached theoretical saturation.

5. Model Interpretation

5.1. Family Factors

Due to parental migration for work or divorce, left-behind children in rural areas often lack family education and care. The family structure of left-behind households is relatively simple, typically including one or both parents and one or more siblings. Because parents are away for work or separated, left-behind children spend limited time with them, leading to weaker stability in family life. In the first place, Wadie Township faces serious issues such as high early marriage and divorce rates. The

lack of adequate family education affects students' academic development, as parents, burdened by work and life pressures, often cannot provide sufficient academic support or supervision. In addition, left-behind families generally experience financial difficulties. Their main income usually comes from parents' migrant work or agricultural activities. Often, one parent cannot leave home to care for younger children, further limiting the family's economic conditions. As a final point, parents in rural areas often have low educational attainment and are mostly engaged in manual labor. This leads to the belief that "schooling is useless, and learning technical skills early is better." As a result, they tend to prefer vocational schools for their children's further education. Traditional values in rural society also make families favor stable, government-supported jobs for their children's career choices.

5.2. School Factors

In rural Yunnan, educational resources are unevenly distributed. Urban and developed areas receive relatively high investment in education, while remote rural regions receive less. Rural schools have limited resources, with relatively weak teaching facilities and teacher quality, which affects students' learning outcomes.

This imbalance leads to two main issues: First and foremost, the teaching workforce is relatively weak. The overall quality of teachers needs improvement, as their professional competence and teaching skills are limited. They themselves lack adequate career education training and thus cannot guide students effectively. Moreover, the relatively poor living conditions and benefits in rural areas make it difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers.

Furthermore, teaching facilities are generally basic and lack modern equipment and tools. Facilities such as multimedia classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and sports fields are often inadequate. This limits the variety of extracurricular activities available to students, hindering the development of their interests and related career aspirations—for example, fostering an interest in becoming a scientist through experiments, an athlete through sports, or a computer professional through IT exposure.

5.3. Student Factors

Due to uneven resource distribution, limited teaching facilities, and teacher shortages, rural students often have gaps in their foundational knowledge.

Firstly, their knowledge base is weak. Rural primary and secondary students often struggle with understanding and memorizing core subjects like math and Chinese, which affects their subsequent learning and overall development.

Secondly, they pay less attention to social issues. With limited access to social information, few opportunities for social practice at school, and little parental guidance at home, rural students have a relatively shallow understanding of social phe-

nomena. They often find it difficult to grasp complex political, economic, and cultural issues or their underlying causes.

Additionally, they are easily influenced by online trends. Due to limited life experience and educational resources, rural students often lack emotional support and close relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and self-doubt. As a result, they are highly susceptible to online trends and ideas. This is especially true when parents are absent—rural students spend significant time on mobile devices and the internet, consuming online information at a superficial level without critical thinking or discernment. Consequently, they fail to form clear self-awareness and plans, and may frequently change career aspirations due to influences from online figures such as gaming streamers or celebrities.

5.4. Social Factors

Rural students often lack adequate support and motivation in their learning and living environments. Absent families and ineffective schooling lead to disinterest in career planning and choices. Furthermore, the relatively poor learning environment and atmosphere in rural schools make social and cultural influences—especially from the internet—highly impactful on students' development.

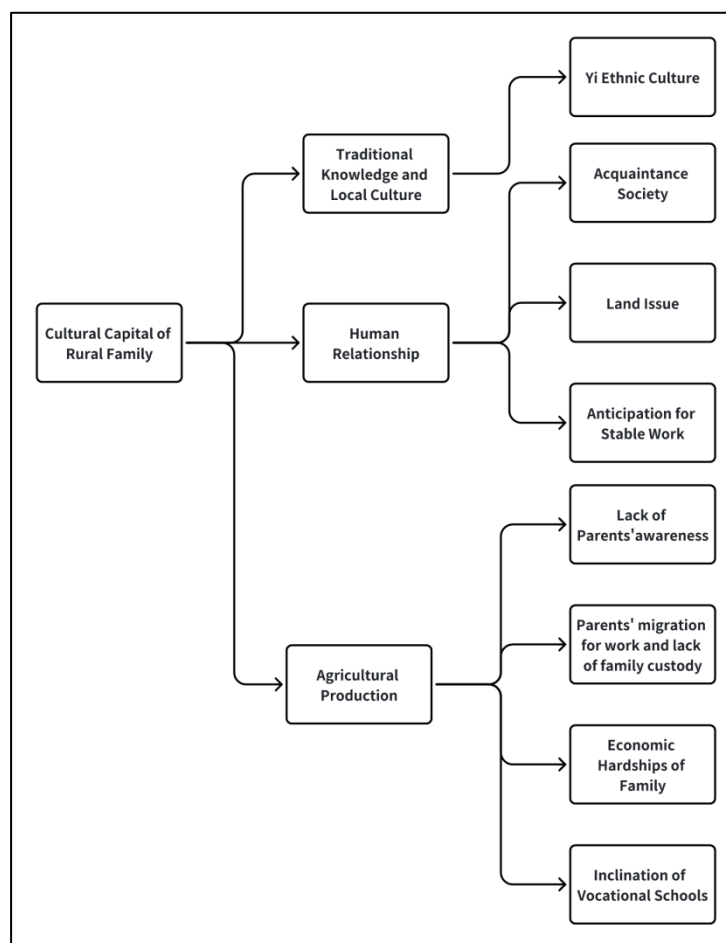
Firstly, the internet meets rural students' emotional and interest-based needs. Abundant online learning resources can help them supplement knowledge and skills—for example, learning to draw or dance through short videos.

Secondly, adaptation to the virtual environment can lead to dissatisfaction with real rural life. Students may become immersed online and reluctant to return to reality, hindering their social development. Finally, online idols from music and variety shows enrich rural students' entertainment and shape their outlooks and values. Students see these idols as role models, and their experiences can influence major life decisions, such as exam preparation and career choices.

6. The Mechanism of Rural Family Cultural Capital's Influence on Career Education

Based on grounded theory analysis, among the four factor--family, school, student, and social influences—family factors are the root cause affecting career education for rural primary and secondary students. Lack of parental supervision, limited parental awareness, and financial difficulties hinder rural students' career planning. Meanwhile, expectations for stable government jobs and a preference for vocational schools reflect compromises made by rural families under conditions of insufficient cultural capital.

Figure 2. Composition and Impact of Rural Family Cultural Capital



Traditional knowledge and local culture are important components of rural family cultural capital. Rural families possess unique advantages in inheriting family traditions, local customs, and folk beliefs. This traditional knowledge and culture play a vital role in understanding the history and development of rural society. By preserving and passing on these cultural heritage elements, rural families strengthen their sense of identity and belonging to their hometown.

Wadie Township is rich in Yi ethnic culture. For example, the “Yanhe Dance” is a traditional Yi dance with a long history and nearly a hundred variations. It covers a wide range of themes, including love and marriage, daily life, cultural entertainment, and primitive religious practices. During festivals, the Yi ethnic people gather in the township’s cultural square to dance, and schools also organize Yi ethnic dance activities. Today, traditional culture is closely linked to vocational education. Policy documents such as the Guidelines on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council emphasize the responsibility of vocational education in preserving intangible cultural heritage. Vocational schools promote awareness and inheritance

of intangible cultural heritage by offering specialized courses, establishing research teams, and organizing practical activities. Thus, traditional knowledge and local culture also subtly influence rural students' career perspectives.

Social networks and interpersonal relationships are another key component of rural family cultural capital. Rural social networks are based on family, kinship, and neighborhood ties, which play essential roles in rural life. Close interpersonal connections are also deeply tied to the land. People build relationships with the land through farming, planting, and breeding--connections that are both emotional and necessary for livelihood. As urbanization advances, rural society experiences increased mobility, diversified employment, and socioeconomic stratification, greatly raising the heterogeneity among rural residents. However, the fundamental characteristics of rural family life rooted in local society have not undergone radical change. Families still prioritize stability in life, which translates into career expectations for their children--often hoping they will become civil servants or teachers and work in their hometowns after graduation.

Agricultural production skills are another major element of rural family cultural capital. Parents in rural families are generally engaged in agricultural or handicraft work, and their mastery and transmission of these skills are crucial to household livelihoods and economic development. However, with socioeconomic development, rural agriculture has been declining. Firstly, accelerated urbanization has led many young people to seek better opportunities in cities, resulting in severe population aging and hollowing-out in rural areas. Secondly, outdated agricultural technology, a lack of modern equipment, and poor management methods have led to declining quality in agricultural output. Thirdly, underdeveloped economic conditions and insufficient educational and healthcare resources have resulted in generally lower standards of education and medical care in rural areas. This not only affects farmers' quality of life but also constrains the development potential of rural regions.

Overall, the decline of rural agriculture is reflected in the reduced living standards of farmers. Due to low agricultural productivity, fluctuating crop prices, and inadequate access to education and healthcare, rural households generally have lower income and quality of life. This not only diminishes their well-being but also exacerbates rural hollowing-out and the prevalence of left-behind children. Families that continue in agriculture face economic challenges and limited perspectives due to insufficient interaction with the broader society. Moreover, the experience-based nature of agricultural production in rural areas leads to a one-sided understanding of careers among rural families. Many believe that even with a college degree, their children may not get employed, making vocational schools a more practical option where they can learn technical skills for future jobs.

7. Conclusion

In summary, improving career education for rural primary and secondary students

requires moving beyond efforts by a single stakeholder. Instead, a collaborative system involving families, schools, society, and local resources should be established: Grounded in shifting family attitudes.

Centered on enhancing school resources, Supported by positive social guidance, and characterized by the activation of local cultural resources. Only through such an integrated approach can we address the challenges of vague career awareness and limited choices among rural students. This will achieve deep integration of career education with rural revitalization and educational equity, providing sustained momentum for the diversified development of rural students and the sustainable progress of rural communities.

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