

From Scale to Quality: Experiences and Challenges in Teacher Education in China

ECNU Review of Education
2019, Vol. 2(2) 196–204
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DOI: 10.1177/2096531119853081
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



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Abstract

Purpose: This essay examines the history of China's teacher education policies, summarizes the Chinese experience of teacher education reform, and frames the major challenges facing teacher education reform in China today.

Design/Approach/Methods: This relies upon a detailed analysis of the teacher education policies implemented by China since 1978. It also explores the actual practice of Chinese teacher education reform by examining the ways in which such reforms have contributed to the overall reform of China's basic education system.

Findings: Chinese teacher education places emphasis on the cultivation of teachers' devotion to education and the importance of improving the teaching skills of normal college students. An effective teacher governance mechanism is the institutional guarantee for the positive role of teachers. However, the absence of comprehensive universities in the open teacher education system and a lack of autonomy for teachers in the performance management system are major challenges facing teacher education in China.

Originality/Value: This essay has outlined the most current and recent reform efforts in China's teacher education. It also explores how such efforts fit into the larger scheme of basic education reform in China.

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Keywords

China, governance, teacher education, teacher policy

Date received: 10 October 2018; accepted: 7 May 2019

China is a country with a vast educational system. As of December 2017, there were 513,800 schools of various educational levels and types in China, with a total of 270 million enrolled students and 16.27 million full-time teachers. Maintaining such an enormous education system demands not only sufficient funds but also—more importantly—consistent support from highly committed teachers. In 2017, the national education expenditure in China amounted to 3,420.4 billion CNY, accounting for 4.14% of the country's total gross domestic product (GDP). 2017 was the first year in which China's education expenditure exceeded 4% of its total GDP. However, during the same year, the world average was 7%, with developed countries averaging around 9% and developing countries averaging 4.1%. Viewed from this perspective, China's enormously large education system is supported financially at a level consistent with the world's less developed countries. The relative strength of China's education system lies not with rich educational resources but with its dedicated and hardworking corps of teachers.

However, the question of how to create a large and, at the same time, stable team of teachers remains. How can such an already "enlarged" team of teachers be "strengthened?" In January 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued *Opinions on comprehensively deepening the reform of the teaching staff construction in the new era*, thereby raising the development of the nation's teaching profession to be a paramount national strategic issue. Thereafter, in February 2018, the Ministry of Education and four other departments jointly issued the *Action plan for the revitalization of teacher education (2018–2022)*. By November 2018, 25 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions in China issued local teacher team construction programs to implement this plan. Continuous and timely reforms for teacher education is not only a challenge facing China but also a common strategic issue for teacher education all over the world.

Selecting a teacher education model to serve the needs of teachers in basic education

At the beginning of its establishment, China's teacher education system was borrowed extensively from the European model, especially that of France (Xu & Li, 2009). The French teacher education system was relatively independent of the then-existing higher education system. The French teacher education system pursued the large-scale training of teachers from the very beginning; this approach differed from that of the elite training modes of higher education. "At the same time, these schools maintained a strong sense of professional responsibility. State control and regulation were seen as essential because the vast majority of teachers were expected to serve at emerging

public schools” (Xu & Li, 2009, p. 55). The French model played an important role in demonstrating the establishment of a comprehensive teacher education system.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese education planners also studied the teacher education system of the Soviet Union, and subsequently formed relatively independent pre-service and in-service teacher training systems. The pre-service system included secondary normal schools for primary school teachers; junior teachers’ colleges for junior secondary school teachers; and provincial or subordinate normal universities for senior secondary school teachers, secondary normal school teachers, and college and university teachers (Xu & Li, 2009, pp. 54–62). This educational model, with its clearly defined levels and functions, closely resembled a planned economy model. Achieving this result was based on two important prerequisites: first, secondary normal school enrollment took priority over that of ordinary senior middle schools; second, subordinate normal university enrollment took priority over other universities due to the “zero-voluntary” recruitment method.

With the massification of higher education and basic education in China, it has become a dominant trend for teacher education to be conducted through higher education. On this stage, Chinese education planners began to learn from the American teacher education model. They used the integration of the two systems as an opportunity to improve the overall standards of the teacher education system and to prevent the closure of the system. The teacher education system was opened up to the entire higher education system, with the hope of recruiting more high-quality academic resources and creating additional educational opportunities for students in teacher schools. From the 1990s onward, teachers’ colleges and universities were either elevated to the comprehensive university level or merged into comprehensive university-run teacher education colleges. The adaptation of the traditional American model was popularized in China, with the goal of establishing a more open teacher education system. At the same time, the old three-level teacher education model of “secondary normal school, junior teachers’ college, normal university” was replaced with a new three-level model of “teachers’ college, normal university, Master of Education.”

In practice, the massification of higher education in China facilitated the transformation of the original teachers’ colleges and universities into comprehensive universities; however, the initiative to establish teachers’ colleges within comprehensive universities was not met with much enthusiasm, and certain of these colleges have been closed down. Moreover, most of the integrated teachers’ colleges and universities were dissolved by the comprehensive universities, and the functionality of the former was improved by the academic quality of the latter in only a few cases. As Zhu et al. (2016) state:

At the institutional level, among the ‘985’ and ‘211’ educational institutions, the number of colleges and universities participating in teacher education decreased annually. In contrast, the number of colleges

and universities outside of the ‘985’ and ‘211’ institutions that participated in teacher education increased annually. This indicates that high-level institutions are still not keen to participate in teacher education. (p. 27)

While opening up the teacher education system had the potential to reinvigorate it and improve the quality of teacher education, openness and marketization have proven insufficient to maintain and replenish China’s ranks of teachers or to ensure that the demand for qualified basic education teachers is fulfilled. China’s more recent policies regarding teacher team construction have once again emphasized the independence and irreplaceability of its normal education system and have stipulated that teachers’ colleges and universities should no longer be renamed. Moreover, the Chinese government has further expanded publicly funded teacher education, which was originally implemented in the subordinate normal universities, demonstrating again that “teacher education requires a relatively stable system and that, for a long time to come, teachers’ colleges and normal universities should be at the core of this system” (Guan, 2009, p. 8). The *Action plan for the revitalization of teacher education (2018–2022)* states that:

the main role of teachers’ colleges and universities should be brought into play, and the construction of the teacher education system should be strengthened. The support for teachers’ colleges should be increased, and the structure of the teacher education layout should be continuously optimized, forming an open, coordinated, and interactive modern teacher education system with the national teacher education base as the guide, the teacher’s college as the main body, participation by high-level comprehensive universities and teacher development institutions as the link, and high-quality primary and secondary schools as the practice base.

Nurturing teachers’ passion for education is the prerequisite for creating vast and stable teacher ranks

The *Teacher’s Law of the People’s Republic of China* defines teachers as “professionals who engage in education and teaching.” However, as a professional group, teachers have certain unique characteristics. Because the educational service provided by teachers falls under the public goods category, there is a spillover effect related to its value, which results in teachers’ earnings being disproportionate to their professional efforts. As a result, only those teachers who derive intrinsic enjoyment from the educational process or gain a sense of achievement from their students’ progress are willing to persist in the profession. In other words, the uniqueness of the teaching profession lies not only in the requirement for teachers to have specialized knowledge and skills but also in the distinctive requirement that they have a passion for their profession. However, the American teacher education model holds that there is no essential difference between teachers and other professions, so a good command of the relevant subject coupled with verbal communication skills are all that is required to make one a qualified teacher. This kind of understanding has led to

the practice of teachers leaving the education profession once they find a better position within the same academic discipline. The high turnover rate of teachers has had a negative impact on the long-term process of teaching and educating.

For this reason, in the *Teacher education curriculum standards (Trial)* developed by China's Ministry of Education, the professional growth of teachers is divided into three areas: educational beliefs and responsibilities, educational knowledge and abilities, and educational practice and experience. This arrangement not only assigns one third of the total weight to the area of educational beliefs and responsibilities but also places it ahead of the other two areas. The *Opinions on comprehensively deepening the reform of the teaching staff construction in the new era* listed "stress on professional ethics" as one of the five major principles for constructing new-era teacher ranks. Moreover, "striving to enhance the ideological and political quality and strengthening the professional ethics and morality of teachers" was mentioned first in the section regarding reform initiatives. The *Action plan for the revitalization of teacher education (2018–2022)* proposed five major goals and tasks for plan implementation. Among them, "implementing the new requirements of teacher ethics education and enhancing its effectiveness" was listed as the first of the five major goals and tasks, once again demonstrating the seriousness with which Chinese administrative education departments treat the professional ethics of teachers.

In fact, the requirement to cultivate a passion for teaching and high professional ethics not only helps to alleviate the urgent need for teachers in basic education but also stabilizes the entire teaching profession. More importantly, it promotes a deep understanding of the intrinsic value of education among teachers. It also allows the teaching process to rise above merely imparting knowledge; thus, this requirement allows teachers to fully demonstrate the fundamental function of education. As a result, teachers develop a profound sense of responsibility, which allows them to persevere as educators and gain a deep sense of achievement while doing so. Furthermore, it is crucial for teachers themselves to view their profession as a career and to transform the external requirements based on their own educational beliefs. Thus, the requirement to cultivate a passion for their profession can enable teachers to delve into the problems and issues in education and teaching and continually improve their professional level; this, in turn, will enhance their value as educators. Emphasizing teachers' education and ethics can help support the stability and peace of mind among basic education teachers.

Emphasis on practical teaching skills is conducive to developing the professional value of teachers

Chinese teacher education policies emphasize the importance of subject matter knowledge. However, due to the uniqueness of the evaluation criteria for knowledge in different disciplines, the requirements related to educational and teaching skills are more widely emphasized. In practice,

this means that teacher education in China assigns a high value to teaching skills, even leading to the “criticism of the teacher education model of the traditional normal universities, especially for overemphasizing specialized training while neglecting general education courses” (Song & Zhong, 2011, p. 66). In the *Measures for the implementation of teachers’ professional certification in general colleges and universities (Provisional)*, the Ministry of Education stipulated that, for aspiring teachers, academic credits for the humanities and social sciences, as well as scientific literacy, should not be less than 10% of the total credits taken, whereas discipline-specific course credits should be no less than 50% of the total credits taken. On the other hand, [teacher education programs] must comply with the requirements of the *Teacher education curriculum standards (Trial)*, which stipulates that [teaching skills] courses should account for no less than 14 credits, excluding the full-semester teaching practice. If calculated based on a total of 160 credits over 8 semesters, it follows that [education students’] discipline-specific courses should include no less than 80 credits, and that [teaching skills] courses should include no less than 34 credits. There were previously specific stipulations and guidelines regarding the objectives, categories, and evaluation criteria for teacher education courses. However, the current policies seem to have no corresponding guidelines or normative provisions for such courses due to the overabundance of discipline-specific courses and the difficulty of setting proper guidelines.

From the perspective of improving the professional level of teachers, intentionally emphasizing the teacher education curriculum—in particular, emphasizing teaching skills and educational practice—demonstrates a certain bias. Discipline-specific courses occupy 50% of the total curriculum, thus rendering the teaching-major graduates inferior to the nonteaching-major graduates at the discipline-specific level; thus, it is not surprising that elite secondary schools are not interested in the former type of graduates. However, this kind of curriculum is very beneficial for the improvement of overall teaching efficiency and the stability of large teacher teams. Emphasizing discipline-specific courses is indeed conducive to the professional improvement of teachers. Emphasizing teaching skills and educational practice helps teachers to impart knowledge more effectively and guides them to become better educators. Moreover, it allows them to solidify their professional quality and subject knowledge in the field of education and teaching. This, in turn, allows them to perceive education and teaching as their “field,” thus reducing the flow of teachers into other professions within the same discipline and increasing the likelihood of teachers remaining in education and teaching positions.

A systematic governance mechanism to assure the development and maintenance of a national teaching corps

The development and maintenance of a stable corps of teachers who are highly professional and have a passion for education requires both a high-quality teacher education system and a

nationwide governance mechanism. The construction of a nation's teaching profession can enter a virtuous cycle only if teachers' colleges and universities train excellent teachers while the state provides an effective teacher management system. If there is no effective governance mechanism for teachers, outstanding students will not be attracted to apply for admission to teachers' colleges and universities; moreover, even those students who are admitted will not be motivated to strive for excellence. Ensuring the stability of the teaching profession in China requires a unique and systematic governance mechanism.

The *Teacher's Law of the People's Republic of China*, which came into effect on January 1, 1994, defines teachers as "professionals who perform educational and teaching responsibilities." It was with this clear positioning that a series of follow-up governance tools were launched. For example, the teaching qualification system has been clearly defined, and at the same time, the academic requirements for obtaining teaching qualifications at different stages have been stipulated; the implementation of a teacher appointment system and teacher position system has been proposed, thus establishing a professional title system. A clear rule that the "average salary of teachers should not be lower than the average salary of national civil servants and that it will gradually increase" has been formulated. This series of governance tools has enabled the teaching profession in China to form a self-contained system, in which (1) professionals set the direction, (2) the teaching qualification system is the first-level threshold, (3) the teacher post and professional title systems are the development steps, (4) the teacher appointment system is a second-level threshold, and (5) the teacher salary standard is a fundamental guarantee. Moreover, with the abundant teacher reserves of today, education planners changed the tenure system for teaching qualifications to a periodical registration system, thus ensuring that the entire teaching team would have up-to-date teaching knowledge and qualifications.

If the teacher education system trains highly qualified teachers, but the teaching profession fails to offer sufficient professional self-fulfillment opportunities, occupational rewards, and advancement opportunities worth pursuing, qualified teachers will leave the profession—or remain without any motivation to work hard. When the teacher governance mechanism is inadequate, the most likely phenomenon is not the departure of excellent teachers or their work burnout but the failure of the entire education system to recruit outstanding talents. However, the teaching profession needs to recruit suitable—not outstanding—talents because not all outstanding talents are suitable. However, if more outstanding and talented individuals are willing to teach, perhaps more of the suitable talents can become outstanding. In order to enable teachers with high performance to receive high incomes, from January 2009 onward, the teacher performance salary system was introduced among the teachers in the compulsory education stage, and then, the teacher performance salary system was introduced to high school teachers, thus covering all teachers within the basic education system. Of course, the implementation of the teacher performance salary system is

not necessarily satisfactory in terms of producing specific results, but the concept of this preferential treatment has penetrated into the teacher governance mechanism. At present, new components are being added to the performance pay to further adjust the previous relatively solid teacher performance pay system in order to make it more suitable for the actual situation of teacher management in basic education.

In order to satisfy the urgent need for teachers in basic education, it is essential to form a relatively closed teacher education system and a relatively systematic teacher governance mechanism. The former system can guarantee the supply of teachers that China requires now and in the future, whereas the latter can ensure the stability of the teaching profession in China. However, given the guaranteed supply and ensured stability of this enormous team of teachers, the teacher supply system needs to remain open to strengthen it further (e.g., by becoming open to comprehensive universities). Moreover, the teacher governance system should remain competitive (e.g., by introducing a merit-based salary system). However, when the teacher education system was actually opened up to comprehensive universities, it did not attract the attention of high-quality comprehensive universities. Instead, the teachers' colleges and universities were transformed or integrated into the comprehensive university education system. In addition, after the introduction of the merit-based salary system, rather than highly efficient education work spurred on by the competition mechanism, we observed more conflicts in the school administration, which, in turn, dampened teachers' passion for teaching. In short, China has obtained remarkable results on the "scale" aspect of its national team of teachers. However, there remains a long way ahead on the path of enhancing its "quality."

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is funded by the research project of the Humanities and Social Sciences Youth Interdisciplinary Innovation Team, East China Normal University and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities Project (No. 2018ECNU-QKT003).

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