

Teachers' Training and Development in Sichuan Province, PRC:

The Status Quo and Existing Problems¹

FORMATION ET PERFECTIONNEMENT DES ENSEIGNANTS DANS LA PROVINCE DU SICHUAN, RÉPUBLIQUE POPULAIRE DE CHINE:

LE STATU QUO ET LES PROBLÈMES ACTUELS

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Abstract: Our study shows that Sichuan Province has established a modern normal education system with its unique features, in which the courses offered continue to be optimized and practice teaching attracts increasing respect. However, the teaching of professional knowledge and general knowledge about education still cannot strike a balance. The teachers' qualification credentialing system guarantees professional development; the position appointment system has taken effect, but the personnel quota system needs more flexibility. Teachers' salary is on the small side. Schools, colleges, and universities differ greatly in teachers' welfare due to absence of a corresponding security system protecting teachers' rights and interests. Educational authorities on the whole have experienced growing awareness of teachers' in-service training, which is rich in form while weak in content.

Key words: Sichuan Province; teachers' training and development; status quo; problems

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Résumé: Notre étude montre que la province du Sichuan a mis en place un système moderne de l'éducation normale avec ses caractéristiques uniques, dans lequel les cours offerts continuent à être optimisés et l'enseignement pratique attire de plus en plus de respect. Toutefois, l'enseignement des connaissances professionnelles et des connaissances générales sur l'éducation ne peut toujours pas trouver un équilibre. Le système de l'accréditation de la qualification des enseignants garantit le perfectionnement professionnel; le système de la désignation des postes a montré des effets, mais le système du quota personnel a besoin de plus de flexibilité. Le salaire des enseignants n'est pas très élevé. Le bien-être des enseignants diffère grandement selon les écoles, les collèges et les universités en raison d'une absence d'un système de sécurité approprié qui protège les droits et les intérêts des enseignants. Les autorités éducatives ont connu une sensibilisation croissante vis à vis de la formation continue des enseignants, qui est riche en forme tandis que faible dans le contenu.

Mots-Clés: province du Sichuan; formation et développement des enseignants, statu quo; problèmes

Teachers' qualifications exert great influence upon the quality of education because teachers are the subjective element in the micro system of education. Teachers' training and development plays a critical role in the course of education because teachers are the key element in the macro system of education. It is a must to strengthen teachers' training so that the educational course can move forward. Therefore, information about the present situation as well as problems arising from teachers' training and development is in bad need. We have conducted a study on teachers' pre-service training, the school organizational system, pay and welfare, and in-service training, describing the status quo and problems of teachers training and development in Sichuan Province.

1. PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

1.1 Training Institutions

A characteristic modern normal education system has taken shape. In Sichuan, there were three kinds of public institutions in charge of teachers' pre-service training: secondary normal schools, normal colleges (without degree programs), and normal universities (offering degrees). Students of secondary normal schools, who are graduates from secondary schools, lack a solid basis in professional knowledge, thus failing to meet the needs of modern education. Presently, secondary normal schools are excluded from teachers' pre-service training. Teachers' pre-service training is now part of higher education in this province. It should be noted that, with the evolution of teachers' qualification credentialing system, some education companies also play a part in teachers' pre-service training, e.g. the Startcareer education company and the Longmen education company (which are two of the key education companies in Chendu, Sichuan) etc. Our study shows that they have become an important supplement to the teachers' pre-service training system. For instance, in 2007 and 2008 Startcareer trained over 4,000 people (some are students who don't major in normal education; others are employees & workers) and 93.7% of them have passed the teachers' qualification credentialing tests. Therefore, education companies, as private training institutions, have their place in contributing to teachers' training variety, promoting implementation of the teachers' qualification credentialing system, and in some sense displaying the credentialing system's merits in an effective way.

1.2 Courses Offered

Enormous efforts have been undertaken to continue optimizing the structure of basic courses. First, the basic courses are made up of 'general education course plus specialized course'. The general courses equip students with a consolidated basis in multi-discipline knowledge, the spirit of creation, and the ability to practice. The specialized courses effectively arouse their interest in knowledge renewing, and greatly facilitate their professional development. Second, basic courses can be divided into two categories: compulsory and optional. The former are arranged by the school, which ensures quality courses. The latter, based on the program modules set up by corresponding first-level disciplines and taking advantage of specific departments that provide excellent teachers and courses, help much to construct a perfect platform for inter-discipline optional courses. The Sichuan Normal University is a case in point. The university has been engaged in instructive exploration into cultivation of primary school and high school teachers with comprehensive qualities by energetically promoting the cross-major and inter-departmental course selection system as well as setting up and bettering the system of second bachelor's degree and major/minor study.

1.3 Practice Teaching

Practice teaching plays an important role in teachers' pre-service training. Our study shows that the time duration of practice teaching by students majoring in education lasts no less than 18 weeks (i.e. within one single semester) while that of students on job-based practice lasts 24 weeks; moreover, related departments/colleges will appoint full-time teachers supervising students' practice activities. For example, the Sichuan Normal University offers practice teaching which involves experiments, professional training, research ability development, probation, and social activities etc. Based on practice teaching at different stages, both in-class/out-of-class practice and on-campus/out-of-campus practice are well integrated to improve the practice teaching of corresponding majors. In addition, her colleges and departments value their interaction with primary schools and high schools and have established stable partnerships with them. Simultaneously, she continues to reinforce construction of out-of-campus practice teaching bases as well as increase the number of teaching bases and job-based practice bases.

1.4 Problems in Education

Practice wisdom is absent in education. Up to present, existing courses are still focused on unilateral transmission of knowledge and experience; students have no access to gaining practice wisdom from self-reflection. Instructors are thus faced with great uncertainties; they need to adapt to actual classroom situations while making good use of educational principles and methods so that better results can be achieved. What instructors apply here is practice wisdom, the ability to employ educational principles and devices aptly. Obviously, effective pre-service training must include sufficient practice courses enabling students to master educational principles and methods through teaching practice.

The teaching of professional knowledge and educational theories needs to be improved, too. Under the present teachers' training system, basic colleges (departments that offer basic courses such as Chinese, maths, and P.E. etc.) are responsible for teaching professional knowledge while colleges of education are committed to teaching educational theories. It turns out that instructors of basic colleges know little about educational theories and simply teach professional knowledge whereas instructors of colleges of education do not probe into concerning disciplines and simply teach educational theories. One of the unfavorable consequences is that trainee teachers know well about educational theories and methods but often complain that theories are 'useless', for they fail to put them into practice.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM

2.1 The Teachers' Qualification Credentialing System

The present teachers' qualification credentialing system has witnessed enormous achievements these years. Only those who are legally awarded the teachers' qualification certificate are qualified and allowed to teach in the educational institutions approved by the educational authority. In 2007 Sichuan began to implement the credentialing system. Teachers' training and development has made three big breakthroughs from then on. First, teachers are doing better in educational background with higher academic degrees. The ratio of teachers of primary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools who meet the national minimum requirements of educational background is 99.25%, 97.17%, and 89.55%, respectively, which are 2.78%, 3.48%, and 29.01% higher than those of 2000. Second, the number of teachers has experienced considerate growth. In 2008 the overall staff of secondary vocational and technological schools is 48,000, making up 5.06% of China's teachers and ranking six in China. Full-time teachers count 35,300, 6.79% higher than that of 2007, take up 5.04% of China's teachers and rank six in China. Finally, the distribution of professional titles tends to be more reasonable. For example, among the full-time senior high school teachers there are 18,078 senior teachers accounting for 22.87% of all and there are 26,520 first-grade teachers taking up 33.55% of all, which suffices to meet the basic needs of secondary education.

2.2 Appointment of Teachers

The reform of the personnel system of Sichuan educational institutions has been making progress. First, the reform brings about the first set of personnel quota principles since the foundation of China, which basically depicts a picture of Sichuan teachers' teams with regard to the discipline structure and general characteristics, and guarantees the development of Sichuan educational course. Second, the reform not only sets up but also continues to perfect the staff appointment system for primary schools and high schools. It establishes an open recruitment system for enrolling new teachers, which invests teachers with unprecedented flexibility when choosing to work in a certain school and plays an important role in attracting management talents to develop the educational course. Rules for selecting and appointing headmasters of primary schools and high schools have been improved; pilots for position appointment and assessment have been carried out, too. Thirdly and finally, the training and backup mechanism of countryside primary school and high school teachers has been being renewed; the Plan of Special Position of Countryside Teachers and the Western Volunteers Plan come into reality. Therefore, tens of thousands of college graduates begin to take up the teaching post in the countryside or the minority area (exclusively in those schools that are responsible for 9-year compulsory education).

2.3 Establishment of Teacher Echelon

The number of discipline echelon and core teachers is growing due to the following efforts. First, "the Academician Program" has been implemented. Favorable working conditions are provided for existing academicians to help them become masters with international fame. Preferential policies are worked out to attract academicians from various levels of research institutions and other provinces as part of high-level talents, contributing to the construction of key disciplines. Second, the "Plan of Talent Climbing" has been launched. Measures have been taken to reinforce the national "Program of Thousands of Millions of Talents" and the cultivation of academic leaders, technical leaders, and potential candidates. Measures are also taken to strengthen cultivation of potential candidates for primary school and high school special grade teachers (the top professional title for primary school and high school teachers) and core teachers who are young or around middle age, improving their overall qualities. Third, the "Relay Plan" of talents has been carried out. Encouragement is given to cultivation

of talents with master degrees or doctoral degrees as well as to construction of an academic echelon mainly composed of doctors and post-doctors, who will become the key force in discipline construction in Sichuan Province. Fourth and finally, an extensive program is carried out facilitating continuing education of primary school and high school teachers; considerable achievements in fostering double professionally-titled teachers in vocational education are made; the “Plan of high-level talents with creative spirit” is also in smooth progress.

2.4 Problems Exist in the Organizational System

The personnel quota system turns out to be too inflexible. At each particular period, schools/colleges differ much as to recruitment of new staff, either in number or in vacancy. However, primary schools and high schools in Sichuan are partly authorized to recruit their own staff. In other words, the number of new teachers to be recruited completely depends on the personnel quota allocated by corresponding educational authorities—the Bureau of Education at various levels. The personnel quota system places severe constraints on schools/colleges, which are unable to recruit proper number of new staff they really need. It is not uncommon that schools/colleges have unreasonable teacher/student ratio: some have a small number of students yet a large number of teachers; some experience dramatic growth in the number of students with insufficient supply of newly enrolled teachers and existing teachers are exhausted by overwork. One more consequence is that the system in effect limits the flowing of teachers among schools/colleges—it is almost impossible for teachers to quit and work in another college. What should be noted is that the population growth of Sichuan is estimated to witness a summit in 2020. It can be predicted that the number of students will go through considerable drops in the coming decades. The educational course in Sichuan may very well be faced with difficulties if the personnel quota system stays still without any modifications.

3. TEACHERS’ PAY AND WELFARE

3.1 Salary

Statistics show that primary school and high school teachers in Sichuan are paid a relatively small salary and live a hard life. Those who have 5-10-year work experience have a monthly pay of 600-800 RMB (what teachers finally have after some deductions, e.g. tax deductions, social insurances etc.); those who have 10-20-year work experience have 760-1000 RMB. On the whole, half of them earn less than 1000 RMB. Compared to 1319 RMB — the average monthly salary of the work force in Sichuan Province, their salary is too small to match the professional fame they have enjoyed and the social contributions they have made. Even worse is the tiny salary of primary school and high school teachers of the countryside schools. Our study on the countryside teachers from all the counties of three eastern cities in Sichuan indicates that primary school teachers there get a monthly pay of 500-600 RMB while high school teachers get 600-700 RMB. Back pay and pay deduction are serious and common. Substitute/temporary teachers, who are “outsiders” of the personnel quota system, are faced with a more difficult life because their monthly salary is 200-300 RMB on average. Other studies/researches also show that countryside teachers are still struggling to live with a tiny pay. According to concerning national regulations, the merit pay system should have taken effect in January 2009 throughout Sichuan Province, which could have solved some sticky problems, but it has been delayed practice because of unknown reasons.

3.2 Welfare

Teachers’ welfare consists of lecture fees, special festival grants, insurances, accumulation fund, etc. On the one hand, teachers’ salary mainly depends on their professional titles. In Sichuan teachers of the

same professional titles gain the same sum of pay transferred directly from the nation account to their own bank accounts. On the other hand, teachers' welfare varies much as to particular schools because each school has its own ways of making money and differs considerably in overall financial capacity. Take the example of the accumulation fund of high school teachers. Teachers turn in a certain sum of accumulation fund to corresponding government authorities every month. Part of teachers' accumulation fund comes from the school, which vary dramatically with regard to different schools. Most schools turn in a monthly accumulation fund of about 200 RMB for their teachers. Some turn in 100 RMB; Others turn in 500RMB. As to lecture fees, junior high school teachers get an hourly pay of about 11 RMB, senior high school teachers about 12 RMB, and college teachers up to 50 RMB or so. Taking the price/time ratio into account, 50 RMB is still on the small side. The biggest difference might lie in special festival grants. Our study shows that in Chengdu City, capital of Sichuan Province, School C gives out 400 RMB as festival bonus to every teacher on Teachers' Day while School Q 4000 RMB; School C gives out 50 RMB festival bonus to every teacher on the Mid-Autumn Festival while School Q 500 RMB.

3.3 Teachers' Status

China has a long tradition paying serious respect to teachers, who are endowed with nobility by the Chinese culture. Nevertheless, teachers do not enjoy the social status and economic status they should have deserved. For example, teachers are often praised and compared to "red candle", "gardener", and "engineer of soul", etc. Undeniably, we should be aware that the respect for teachers is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and is to a great extent UNCONSCIOUS. On the other hand, our study shows that teachers receive little economic support from the government. Teachers' salary is a mirror of their economic status, for it is the basic guarantee of their life. Our study also shows that 74.36% of teachers in Sichuan get a monthly pay of less than 2000 RMB, that 74.93% of them complain about the small pay, and that 53.20% of them are inclined to find a better-paid job when their actual pay is smaller than expected.

3.4 Teachers' Rights and Interests

At present, there is no security system of rights and interests for teachers. An easy, effective way for teachers to express their ideas must be established so that their own legal rights and interests can be put under protection. Although existing law and regulation does provide teachers with some channels to express themselves, it is not infrequent that institutional inefficiency hinders their expression, or that their problems are ignored by the authorities, which may lead to unexpected disturbance of regular teaching activities, even impulsive behavior. On the contrary, an effective way of expression will act as a friendly bridge between superiors and inferiors, which certainly enable teachers to protect their own rights and interests by adopting legal devices, and helps considerably to the harmony of the whole society. Hence, it is fairly urgent that corresponding laws and/or regulations must be set up to ensure that teachers' opinions and problems gain deserved attention and reasonable solutions for the purpose of protecting teachers' rights and interests.

4. IN-SERVICE TRAINING

4.1 Public Awareness

Our study shows that awareness of teachers' in-service training has witnessed sharp and dramatic increase in Sichuan. Many educational authorities have discarded the stale idea that "If you are knowledgeable, you can work as a teacher" and have realized that in-service training is necessary for specialization of the teaching profession. In our interview, HOU Kailiang from the Langzhong Dongfeng High School pointed out, "The teaching profession requires teachers to accumulate a sea of practical

experience. It is from their extended teaching practice that teachers gain insights into education. They need to be engaged in self-study and professional training so as to cultivate the ability of constant reflection and improve their teaching performance. In-service training will not only equip teachers with modern educational theories and facilitates specialization of the teaching profession, but also improve educational qualities effectively.' Our other interviews also show that some of the school management have it clearly in their mind that in-service training is an innate need of teachers' development. Most of them hold the idea that every teacher owns the desire/ideal of self-fulfillment, which can be realized by formal, quality in-service training that renews teachers' knowledge and betters their understandings about education. In a word, in-service training is both a way for teachers to apply theory to practice and a process for them to mold their personality and search for the meaning of life.

4.2 Classification

There are basically two types of in-service training in Sichuan. Generally speaking, teachers who are lacking in teaching experience need to receive in-service training, which can be called "novice training". For more experienced teachers, in-service training helps them grow from the experienced into specialists, which can be called "specialist training". These two types of training are quite different. The former lays emphasis on teaching experience and teaching methods, which enhances teachers' understandings about their roles and acquaints them with teaching practice so that they become competent instructors. This is in essence a form of pre-service training. In most cases, trainers are veteran teachers from schools or colleges/universities. Additionally, newly enrolled college teachers are required to attend pre-service training in every summer vacation in Sichuan. The one-month training will equip them with basic educational knowledge, and certificates are awarded to those who have passed the exam in the end. In contrast, the specialist training is mainly engaged in up-to-date educational theories, research methods in the field of education, and psychological assistance to the students etc. It helps trainee teachers to expand their horizon, gain insights into educational theories, and obtain access to the latest studies of education. In most cases, trainers are professionals from colleges/universities or research institutes at various levels.

4.3 Training Institutions & Training Patterns

In Sichuan, in-service training is mainly taken up by teachers' continuing education schools and the continuing education schools of educational research institutions at various levels. Training patterns vary as to satisfying the diverse needs of teachers' training in each particular region. One of those frequently-seen patterns is classroom learning. That is highly effective because it takes only a short period of time to expose trainees to a sea of knowledge, which may be one of the reasons why classroom learning still dominates among the existing training patterns. Another pattern is online learning. Online learning can in some way make up for the disadvantages brought about by classroom learning and thus becomes a solution to some of the problems with classroom learning. In online learning, training videos are available online. Trainees are required to watch designated videos, take notes, and write about their teaching practice, etc. Self-study after class is a third pattern. It is fairly flexible. Materials are given out to trainees, who are supposed to learn required materials and finish assignments within the time limit. The fourth pattern, a popular way of training among trainees, is attending other trainees' lectures for the purpose of learning from others. Trainees can choose to give demonstration lectures, compete in teaching matches, or evaluate others' lectures, as part of their in-service training. Most importantly, by taking demonstration lectures, which are often integrated with the latest educational theories, trainees can learn much from each other.

4.4 Problems

There is little connection between pre-service training institutions and in-service training institutions. The former mainly include normal colleges at various levels while the latter consist of colleges of education, teachers' continuing education schools, and adult education colleges of normal colleges/universities. Compared to the well-formed pre-service training system, the in-service training system appears to have a few weaknesses. First, the content of in-service training is partly, sometimes

even completely, overlapped with that of pre-service training, leading to ineffective training. Second, most colleges of education are not entitled to offer degree programs and need to enlarge their academic categories as well as strengthen their academic echelon. They are unable to offer quality lectures/training, failing to meet the specific needs of in-service training. At last, instructors of teachers' continuing schools at the county level cannot meet the general qualification standards set up by educational authorities for in-service training.

In-service training needs to improve the training content due to the following reasons. First, it borrows many courses from pre-service training and simply focuses on pedagogy, psychology and basic teaching skills. Moreover, it ignores the particular needs of teachers' development, sticking to out-of-date educational ideas and offering educational research training and pedagogies that fail to display corresponding discipline features. Second, in-service training seems to overlook the fact that teachers at different stages of development must receive appropriate training at the right stage of his/her professional development. However, most in-service training offers almost the same courses and content, making it almost meaningless to the trainees. Last but not least, most in-service training leaves no place for professional virtues and educational theories while laying too much emphasis on technical skills related to class teaching. At the same time, it values professional knowledge and modern educational technology while paying little attention to scientific educational ideas and the right morality of being a teacher.

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