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Keywords

Teacher policy; China; new era

In early 2018, China promulgated the *Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Force Development in the New Era*. This was a new landmark teacher policy endorsed at the highest decision-making level since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The policy established ambitious objectives: by 2035, it aims to increase the quality of teachers greatly, to modernize governance systems, and to make teaching an enviable profession. At the same time, it proposes a series of policy programs that include 23 policy measures.

Over the past decades, China's education policies have valued the construction of basic educational infrastructure over the teacher development. Some reviews have noted that this new policy is a milestone in Chinese education (Zhang, 2018b), and signifies a shift in the strategic focus of China's education policy away from hardware inputs and towards the teacher development (Li, 2018). It is certain that this policy will have profound effects on the construction of the teacher resources in China, and will serve as an important authoritative reference for educational reforms, public financial investment, and the development of the teaching profession in the coming future.

1. Policy Characteristics and Innovations

Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Force Development in the New Era is an anticipated policy that has been developed over a long period. It has some distinct characteristics and proposes constructive programs.

This policy is featured by its authoritativeness since it was determined at a high level of decision-making and published by a high-ranking body. The policy was decided upon by the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms of Chinese Communist Party and was issued under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms is one of the four key top-level decision-making and coordination bodies established after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and is responsible for designing and implementing reforms. The other three groups are the National Security Commission of the Communist Party of China, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, and the Central Leading Group for Military Reform. This is the first time since the establishment of the PRC that a teacher policy has been executed at such a high decision-making level and published by such a prominent body. This gives the policy a high degree of authority, and is an important reason why the policy has received extensive attention.

A second distinct characteristic of this reform program is that it is related to a variety of teacher policy fields and has strong comprehensive and systematic characteristics. A World Bank study argues that teacher policy can be divided into ten elements (SABER, 2012). The reform programs proposed in this new policy cover each of these ten elements of teacher policy.

- With regard to initial teacher preparation, the new policy proposes an increase in the per-student funding allocation to normal schools, colleges, and universities, incentivizing early student recruitment by normal schools, colleges, and universities, establishing a college assessment with teaching characteristics, and supporting high-level and comprehensive universities in the development of teacher training.
- With regard to qualifications for the employment and retention of teachers, the new policy proposes “gradual participation in ongoing education programs for teachers and participation in practical

teaching as an essential condition for determining teaching ability and obtaining teacher qualifications.” In addition, the policy proposes gradually upgrading the educational qualifications for teachers by “upgrading the preschool teachers’ qualifications to an associate’s degree, the elementary school teachers’ qualifications to an associate’s degree in teaching or a bachelor’s degree in non-teaching, the junior high school teachers’ qualifications to a bachelor’s degree, and the senior high school teachers’ qualifications to graduate experience in some locations.”

- With regard to recruitment and employment, the policy proposes the “selection of people with superior ability who are passionate about teaching and are suited to the teaching profession.”
- With regard to workload and professional autonomy, the policy proposes that teachers should be able to select their own courses in teacher training, and that the formalist assessment should be prevented from interfering with the normal teaching.
- With regard to professional development, the policy proposes measures to strengthen teacher training and improve the teaching and research system.
- With regard to remuneration and benefits, the policy proposes that the average salary level of elementary and secondary school teachers should not be lower than that of local civil servants, and that institutional measures should be used to protect the social status of teachers.
- With regard to retirement rules and benefits, the policy proposes that rural teachers who have worked for 30 years or more should be honored at retirement.
- With regard to monitoring and evaluation of teacher quality, the policy emphasizes the dual necessity for morality and teaching performance, and the avoidance to use students’ test scores and enrollment rates to assess teachers.
- With regard to the representation and participation of teachers, the policy proposes the establishment of a completely representative assembly for teaching staff in order to guarantee the democratic rights of teachers to participate in school decision making.
- With regard to school leadership, the policy proposes a reform of the ranking system for the principals of elementary and junior high schools, expanding the space available for career development, and promoting professionalization of school principals.

These policy measures are coordinated with one another and come together as a strongly systemic body. In addition, the policy also proposes reforms with distinct Chinese characteristics. For example, by strengthening the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the policy states the need to “strengthen leadership and implement a Yibashou (literally as first hand, meaning head leader) responsibility system (i.e., a head leader is held directly responsible and accountable for implementation and supervision)” and “prioritize teachers and teaching in the educational agenda”. Additionally, the policy specifically emphasizes teacher morality. China has traditionally viewed teachers as having significant ethical importance, rather than being just a profession. The Chinese language has idiomatic expressions such as “a teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime”. As such, the policy proposes to improve the ideological and political quality of teachers and to implement programs for improving teacher’s morality and professionalism.

A third distinct characteristic of this policy is that it clarifies that policies aimed at the teacher development are granted preferential development status within the field of education. This is apparent particularly in the prioritized allocation of political resources and the preferential investment of public finances.

With regard to the preferential allocation of political resources, it is noteworthy that the phrase “Yibashou responsibility system” is used. Here, “Yibashou” refers to the CPC branch secretaries as head leaders of public organizations of every level and type. It is widely known that the CPC has a unique status in China, and “party leadership of government” and the “mutual embedding of the party and state” are characteristics specific to China’s political ecology (He & Kong, 2011). The adoption of the “Yibashou responsibility system” implies that questions related to the construction of the teacher resources will be given high priority over policy issues.

With regard to investment of public finance, the policy proposes that each level of government will be required to give priority to the construction of the teacher resources as a focus of educational investment. Chinese financial investment in education in the past has emphasized investment in the hardware and infrastructure. Public investment in teachers’ salaries is insufficient, especially on the county level. The new teacher policy proactively addresses these issues (Zhang, 2018a, pp. 5–8).

2. Difficulties and Challenges

The policy looks forward to 2035, and the Chinese government has proposed the goal of cultivating highly qualified, professional, and innovative teachers, in addition to proposing a thorough series of related programs. However, it must be recognized that China has several practical problems to overcome in order to achieve this goal.

First, teacher education has suffered marginalization within the overall system of higher education. China adopted a relatively closed and elitist system for teacher training prior to the 1990s. This teacher education system comprised three tiers: secondary normal schools for training primary school teachers, higher normal schools for training primary school and junior high school teachers, and normal universities for training junior high school and senior high school teachers. This system allocated teacher resources according to the logic embedded in the era of the planned economy. Guided by the government and separate from other non-teaching professions, it conducted early recruitment and employment distribution and adopted individual training models (Zhu, 2005).

As China's higher education system became more available to the wider public, this independent teacher education system dissolved over time, and previous normal universities gradually transformed into comprehensive universities, junior and senior high normal schools were gradually integrated, and secondary normal schools were merged. At present, the teacher education system is significantly weakened, and public finances have not provided adequate support for normal schools and teaching profession. In addition, the proportion of student teachers recruited by normal schools has declined steadily (Wang, 2018). The overall result of these changes has been that teacher education has been gradually marginalized within the overall higher education system (Zhang, 2018a).

Second, China's high-level universities participate limitedly in teacher education. China's modern teacher education system has adopted a joint model that includes normal schools and universities, and comprehensive universities. However, participation of high-level universities is constrained. For example, China's high-level universities, such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Renmin University of China, do not provide teacher education. In terms of total numbers, more than 3,000 Chinese higher education institutions provide teacher education; although this is a large number, more than 2,000 of these

institutions are at or below the junior college level and are at the lowest tier of China's higher education system. The system for establishing China's top-tier universities and academic disciplines emphasizes cutting-edge scientific and academic contributions (Liu, 2018). Given this type of policy guidance, it is difficult to reverse the tendency of high-level universities to avoid providing teacher education quickly. Without the participation of high-level universities, it is difficult for Chinese higher education development to improve the overall quality of Chinese teacher education, which poses significant challenges for training high-quality teachers.

Third, China's county-level teacher training system is weak. Prior to the 1990s, China's county-level teacher training institutions experienced rapid development, and contributed significantly to improving the professional development and academic backgrounds of primary school and junior high school teachers, especially those rural teachers. Subsequently, county-level teacher training institutions gradually weakened and the quality of training declined, due to the indistinct nature of these institutions and a lack of funding guarantees. Currently, county-level teacher training institutions are incapable of performing the function of teacher training. There are about 11 million teachers at the basic education level in China, and nearly 80% of these are concentrated in schools at or below the county level (county, township, or village). The fact that county-level teacher training institutions are largely incapable of playing an effective role implies that more than eight million Chinese teachers have no opportunity to receive adequate in-service training. At present, China's county-level teacher training institutions are attempting to restructure and integrate, although they still face significant challenges.

Fourth, there are still obvious shortcomings in the construction of the teaching force in poor rural regions of China. China is undergoing a process of rapid urbanization at present, which has maintained an average annual growth rate of about 1%. Urbanization creates a continuous outflow of rural school-aged populations, leading to a deterioration of rural schools. The work environment of rural teachers tends to be poor with their long work hours and their lack of professional development support; these factors make rural teaching positions very unattractive, making it impossible to attract young teachers to work in rural areas (Li, 2015). An increasing number of rural teachers reside in cities and towns, and commute between the city and countryside to teach, sometimes spending long periods away from their families; therefore, teachers exhibit a strong trend towards urban relocation. There are about 3.3 million teachers working in rural schools at present, and

they constitute a weak point in China's efforts to build the highly qualified and professional teacher resources. China continues to face the problem of how to guarantee the quality of rural teachers while attracting new teachers to work in rural areas.

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Note on Contributor

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