

Article

Professional Identity of Normal University Directional Training Students for Being Teachers in Rural Areas

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Abstract: The professional identity and teaching intention of normal university students who took a targeted training program for certain areas were analyzed by using a questionnaire survey and unstructured interviews. After graduation, the students who completed the targeted training program become teachers in rural areas. The students attended a university in Jiangsu Province, China and majord geography during 2016–2019. The results showed that the students had a certain degree of professional identity and gradually deepened their knowledge in college training. However, their professional identity and improvement degree were lower than those of students who did not take the targeted training program. 27.33% of the students with the targeted training program chose to work in the rural areas after the mandatory service period. In the process of the targeted training program, we proposed to improve the publicity of the program, optimize the training system, and raise the payment to ensure their continuous work even after the mandatory period.

Keywords: Rural teachers, Directional training students in normal university, Professional identity

1. Introduction

Providing basic education to all children is one of the major educational goals in the world, and teachers are crucial to achieving this goal (Buckler, 2011). Teachers in various countries, rural teachers often have a unique and powerful impact on students' lives (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, and Farmer, 2016; Starrett, Yow, Lotter, Irvin, and Adams, 2021). However, rural education in many countries faces the problem of shortage of teachers (Liu, Liu, & Wang, 2022; Reagan et al., 2019). In China's basic education development, the education in rural areas have been hurdles for a long time (Y. Zhao & Liu, 2019). To stabilize the number of rural teachers and improve the quality of rural teachers, China has recently promulgated and implemented 'Policy on Supporting Rural Education for Teachers in urban areas' (2006), 'Western Scheme on Voluntary Service for University Students (2006), 'Special Post Teacher Scheme' (2006), 'Free Education for Normal University Students' (2007), and 'National Training Scheme' (2008). These policies have provided a large number of teachers to rural schools and effectively improved the whole quality of rural education. The policy of free education for normal university students to be rural teachers was the first effort of China since the 'National Support Plan for rural teachers' (2015–2020) has been implemented. The policy is to strengthen the construction of rural education, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Henan, Hunan, Anhui, and Hainan with the special training program. Through the directional recruitment, training, and employment, the policy has aimed to to train students for being rural teachers. The students in the program can have employment guaranted after graduation Since the formulation and implementation of the training program have not been long, the assessment and research still lack. Therefore, it is workth mainly analyzing the application motivation, policy cognition, training status, and teaching willingness of the students who participate in the training program (Chen, 2019; Niu, 2019; Zhao and Jiang, 2018). It is also necessary to analyze the professional identity of the students for being rural teachers as the professional identity is directly related to the students' acceptance and recognition with a positive attitude and active behavior for learning (Wang, 2007), which is related to students' career visions and designs (Li, Wan, and Qi, 2011). Thus, we carried out the investigation and analysis on the professional identity of the students to provide a reference for the training program and help formulate policies to promote the education.

2. Research Data

Jiangsu Province in China began to recruit students for the rural teacher training program since September 2016. Currently, when the students complete a four-year course, they become rural teachers. For this research, 195 students in the program from 2016 to 2019 were recruited. From February to April 2020, a questionnaire was distributed through a professional platform what is named 'Questionnaire Star' to them. 172 valid questionnaires were recovered, accounting for 88.21% of the total respondents. 56 respondents were male students, accounting for 32.56% of the total respondents, while 116 were female students, accounting for 67.44%. 49 freshmen (96.08%), 53 sophomores (80.31%), 39 juniors (92.86%), and 31 seniors (91.46%) participated in the research. The students were from 11 different prefecture-level cities except Nanjing and Changzhou in Jiangsu Province. Xuzhou, Suqian, Yancheng, and Yangzhou were the cities where more students came from. To compare the result, we conducted the same questionnaire survey for students in general teacher training program A total of 86 questionnaires were collected. Then, horizontal and vertical comparisons were carried out based on a questionnaire survey and unstructured interview.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Number	Percentage
Grade		
Freshmen	49	28.48%
Sophomores	53	30.81%
Juniors	39	22.67%
Seniors	31	18.02%
Gender		
Male	56	32.56%
Female	116	67.44%
Child Situation		
The Only Child	72	41.86%
Non-Only-Child	100	58.14%
Willingness		
Personal Willingness	59	34.30%
Family Willingness	113	65.70%

3. Professional Identity

The students in the target training program started having the professional identity when they registered for the program, and it changed when they were enrolled and educated. Therefore, it is required to analyze the professional identity from the entry to the current period of the training program. The degree of students' professional affection to reflect the professional identity was evaluated with a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 2. Professional identity in different periods and willingness to change majors

Variables	At the Time of Application		Current		Willingness to Change Majors	
	Number	Mean	Number	Mean	Number	Unchanged/Change
Grade						
Freshmen	49	3.27	49	3.59	49	35/14
Sophomores	53	3.38	53	3.87	53	38/15
Juniors	39	3.46	39	3.95	39	24/15
Seniors	31	3.94	31	4.29	31	24/7
Gender						
Male	56	3.73	56	4.00	56	48/8
Female	116	3.34	116	3.81	116	73/43
Child Situation						
The Only Child	72	3.63	72	3.92	72	55/17
Non-Only-Child	100	3.35	100	3.84	100	68/34
Willingness						
Personal Willingness	59	4.05	59	4.20	59	50/9

Family Willingness	113	3.16	113	3.70	113	71/42
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The average score of the professional affection of the students in the program at the time of application was 3.47. Compared with other existing research results (Wu, 2020), this showed a higher degree of affection, but the average score for professional affection of the students in general teacher training programs in same normal university was 3.80 when they entered the programs. Female students' average score was 3.34, which is lower than that of male students (3.73). It is known that girls are more willing to engage in the education career (Wang and Tian, 2014), but it does show different results here. 65.70% of the student was motivated to participate in the targeted training program by their families, whose average score for the affection was 3.16. 34.30% were motivated by their personal intention with average score for the affection of 4.05. In general, it is reasonable to have a high score of professional affection with personal intention. Usually, students' emotional attitudes change, and their cognitions are not comprehensive. They are easy to be affected by various factors, which often leads to declining the identity (Xi, Cao, and Zhen, 2020). It is worth noting that 41.86% of students were the only child but both, and average scores (3.63) was significantly higher than that of non only children (3.35).

Generally speaking, the increase in recognition of the major increases the degree of the professional identity. The average score of professional affection of the student in the targeted training program was 3.87, which was still a little low, because the average score for professional affection of the students in general teacher training programs was 4.03. In unstructured interviews, the students in the targeted training program replied that they did not consider their future careers sufficiently when applying for the program as their parents influenced their decisions and were restricted in choosing majors under the restriction by the education bureau (Tian, Dai, and You, 2020). Due to the significant positive correlation between professional identity, learning engagement, and learning attitude, 29.20% of all students in the survey believed that the learning attitude of the students in the program was lower than that of other students. 62.2% of the students in the program and 83.72% of the students in other programs thought that the idea of "no need for studying hard" led to the negative learning attitude. That is, though the policy of "guaranteed employment" attracted students, it also had a negative effect that caused no pressure and motivation in learning. 14.64% the students in the program were dissatisfied with the fact that they had to return to the countryside to teach. The scores improved with the grades of the students, and the senior students showed the average score of 4.29. The score improved most for sophomore students, which implied that the formation of a systematic understanding of the program after one and a half years of studying. The average score of female students' was 3.81, while that of male students was 4.00. The average score of the only children and others were 3.92 and 3.84.

In order to reflect students' professional identity more truly, the questionnaire designed a hypothesis of intention to change majors. 85.47% of the students in the training program answered that they would choose this program even when changing programs were allowed. This indicated that students had a high degree of recognition of the program. Only 14.53% would choose other programs if allowed. Due to the current reform of college entrance examination in Jiangsu Province, the shortage of teachers and the employment prospect seem to encourage students to find a good job rather than go home through the program. And some students who would change the program considered taking the postgraduate examination in the learning process, which conflicts with the policy that the oriented training cannot take the postgraduate entrance examination. The questionnaire showed that females' willingness to change jobs (37.07%) was higher than men's willingness (14.29%). The willingness of non only child (34%) was higher than that of the only child. Who choose this program from families (37.17%) was much higher than that by themselves (15.25%).

4. Teaching willingness

The professional identity affects willingness to teach, so it is necessary to investigate and analyze the willingness to teach. The survey result showed that 97.67% of the students in the program chose to teach in rural areas after graduating from university, and 100% of the senior students were willing to stick to their contracts, and their willingness to perform was high. Those students understood that they had to return to their hometowns and repay for breaking their contracts. Students who were breaking the contract were mainly in freshman and sophomore years, which reflected that the training program helps them too improve the willingness to obey the contract. 3 students (1.74%) in the program hoped to study for further degrees. However, their plan was contrary to the policy. "Remaining" and "retaining" of teachers are the two main problems faced by rural education. The targeted training program can solve the problem of the shortage of rural teachers and make them stay at their schools. After five years of rural teachers' service, 27.33% of the students in the program will choose to continue to work in the countryside. In reality, students may show a high rate of keep staying as due to occupational opportunity, family situation, and other factors. 40.70% of the students in normal universities expected to teach in cities and towns, and 31.98% of the students in the targeted training program hoped to go to graduate schools. This reflects that rural areas are less attractive due to the divide between urban and rural areas and the concept of "leaving agriculture" (Wu and Xu, 2017), The need for teachers' personal career improvement is the main reason for the

loss of rural teachers. The 5-year retention rate of students who enter the targeted training program by personal willingness was 36.36%, and 20.18% of the students who have family willingness to enter the targeted training program are willing to stay after 5 years.

Table 3. Teaching willingness in different periods in the future

Variables	Number	After Finish School		After 5 Years		
		Honour the agreement	Breach of contract	Continue	Postgraduate	Other
Grade						
Freshmen	49	48	1	7	21	21
Sophomores	53	50	3	15	18	20
Juniors	39	39	0	15	11	13
Seniors	31	31	0	10	5	16
Gender						
Male	56	56	1	18	10	18
Female	116	113	3	29	35	52
Child Situation						
The Only Child	72	69	3	25	21	26
Non-Only-Child	100	99	1	22	34	44
Willingness						
Personal Willingness	59	59	0	22	20	17
Family Willingness	113	109	4	25	35	53

5. Conclusions

The professional identity of the students in the targeted training program was relatively low when compared to that of the students in other programs. The policy to provide jobs and make teachers return to their hometowns was an influencing factor for students and parents to choose the program, which, though, reduced students affection to the program. The professional identity gradually improved with the years spent in the program. However, the policy of "guaranteeing employment" led to negative attitude towards learning, which was reflected in the improvement rate of professional recognition. The policy restricts them to study for further degrees and interferes the improvement of professional recognition. 97.676% of the students in the targeted training program chose to teach in the countryside, and 100% of the seniors were willing to obey their contracts. Therefore, the program helps solve the problem of the shortage of rural teachers. However, after five years' working, only 27.33% teachers would choose to stay.

It is recommended to improve the recruitment policy to ensure the continuous improvement of the shortage of rural teachers. Through lectures, advertisement, and other ways, it is necessary to provide refined students' enrollment policy, training plan, future service requirements, and so on. Then, students and their parents can clearly understand their rights and obligations. The sense of honor and responsibility in rural education needs to be promoted. In the current situation where the urban-rural divide still exists, responsibility and affection of the countryside and dedication are needed to engage in rural education. The school training system is required to ensure "learning well". Through professional introduction courses, career planning courses, lectures, and media recognition, students' sense of identity of being rural teachers can be increased. Through vocational education, the professional spirit and the positive attitude can be enhanced, so is the college students' social responsibility for their employment. The scholarship program is needed, and multi-level basic skill learning is necessary to stimulate the motivation and enthusiasm of the students in the targeted training program.

It is also needed to improve the payment and status of rural teachers for they "stay". More efforts must be made to support rural teachers to pursue further degrees in education and encourage rural teachers with junior college degree to study for undergraduate education. This is to provide opportunities for normal university students to improve their academic qualifications. Rural teachers needs support to participate in open teaching practices, organize teachers' groups, visit each other for classroom and other activities. With such programs, more on-the-job opportunities can be given to rural teachers. The salary and living allowances of rural teachers must be increased to implement the policy and ensure the rural teachers's stay. The evaluation and appointment of professional titles and the selection of key teachers must be offered for rural schools. The proportion of professional titles of teachers in rural schools need be increased, and special indicators for key teachers in rural schools need to be set up. It is necessary to establish the honor system of rural teachers to widely publicize the advanced deeds and selfless dedication of rural teachers and

effectively improve the status of rural teachers. Creating a group of rural teachers with high professional identity and strong willingness to teach needs to be sustained with such policies.

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