

STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING RURAL EDUCATION: NAVIGATING THE PATH FOR TARGETED NORMAL SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Rural education stands as the bedrock of national education and a linchpin for achieving high-quality, balanced development in line with China's strategic goals. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China underscored the need to accelerate the integration of rural and urban education and optimize resource allocation to realize the nation's second centennial goal. In this context, the vital role of rural teachers in revitalizing rural education cannot be overstated. Guangdong Province, in a pioneering move, launched a publicly funded targeted training program for primary and secondary school teachers in its eastern, western, and northern regions since 2018, referred to as "targeted normal school students." This innovative initiative aims to cultivate highly qualified educators in subject areas with shortages, specifically catering to rural kindergartens, special education schools, and compulsory education institutions. Notably, it marks Guangdong as the first province in China to provide government-funded training for education master's degree students. By 2022, the program had successfully enrolled 12,600 participants, receiving annual funding of 20,000 RMB per student for undergraduate programs and 30,000 RMB per student for graduate programs. This initiative stands as a testament to the commitment of both the nation and its people towards bolstering rural education. In this endeavor, educational institutions, especially universities, assume a pivotal role in nurturing locally-rooted, high-quality rural teachers, thus contributing significantly to the advancement of high-quality and balanced compulsory education.

Keywords: Rural education, Teacher training, Compulsory education, educational development Guangdong Province

Introduction

Rural education constitutes an essential component of national education and serves as its foundation. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China Report proposed to "accelerate the high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education and urban-rural integration, optimize regional resource allocation...", underscoring the significance of compulsory education in achieving the second centennial goal. Revitalizing rural education hinges on rural teachers. To supplement rural teaching resources and promote high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education, since 2018, Guangdong Province has initiated a publicly funded targeted training program for primary and secondary school teachers in the eastern, western, and northern regions of the province (hereinafter referred to as targeted normal school students). This program aims to cultivate highly qualified teachers in subjects with shortages for rural kindergartens, special education schools, and compulsory education schools. It has become the first province in China to offer government-funded training for education master's degree students. By 2022, the province had enrolled 12,600 participants in the publicly funded targeted training program (including World Bank loan projects), with annual funding of 20,000 RMB per student for undergraduate programs and 30,000 RMB per student for graduate programs [1]. Training targeted normal school

students is a beneficial measure for the nation and the people, and universities, as educational institutions, play a key role in cultivating high-quality locally-grounded rural teachers to promote high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education.

1. Value Implications of Training Publicly Funded Targeted Normal School Students in the New Era

Targeted normal school students play a crucial role in promoting the high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural compulsory education, continuously meeting the demand for high-quality education in rural areas. They are the backbone of rural revitalization and the foundational talent support for achieving a modernized form of Chinese education.

1.1. Promoting High-Quality Development of Rural Education

The 19th National Congress of CPC Report explicitly stated, "We must take promoting high-quality development as the theme." With changes in the principal contradiction in society, adjustments to educational development strategies, the evolution of basic education itself, and shifts in educational values, China's urban and rural compulsory education has achieved basic balance and entered a stage of high-quality and balanced development. Quality-centered development with balanced distribution is the new goal of balanced development in China's compulsory education. The high-quality development of rural education aims to provide rural communities with high-quality and balanced education that meets their needs, addressing the contradiction between the increasing demand for high-quality education and the imbalanced and insufficient development of rural education. [2] Targeted normal school students, as a fresh force for revitalizing rural education, are a significant driving force behind the high-quality development of rural education.

1.2. Empowering Rural Revitalization

The "Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018-2022)" lists "prioritizing the development of rural education" as the first section under the chapter "Improving the Level of Rural Livelihood Security," highlighting the nation's high regard for rural education. Rural revitalization is closely tied to the revitalization of rural education, which can empower the process of rural revitalization. High-quality rural teachers are the backbone of rural revitalization, serving as the leverage point to address the weakest link in China's basic education. [3] The knowledge transfer situation of targeted normal school students directly determines the speed and quality of rural revitalization.

1.3. Achieving Modernization of Chinese-style Education

The 19th National Congress of CPC Report proposes to "promote the comprehensive development of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation with Chinese characteristics," with educational modernization being a fundamental and strategic support in this process. As the "nerve endings" of Chinese education, rural education is the derivation and interpretation of education in rural areas, determining the overall health of the educational organism. Its role is indispensable as we move toward the journey of educational modernization by 2035. Transforming targeted normal school students into a high-quality workforce capable of contributing to rural education is key to achieving the modernization of Chinese-style education.

2. Issues in the Training of Publicly Funded Targeted Normal School Students in the New Era

From the "Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan (2018-2022)" jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and other fire departments in 2018, to the "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of the New Era Rural Teacher Team" issued by the Ministry of Education and other six departments in 2020, the country has attached great importance to rural education. Investigations reveal that under the encouragement and support of policies, the current enrollment of targeted normal school students in universities can largely achieve a 100% "placement rate." However, there exist significant issues such as poor teaching quality, inability to retain teachers, and lack of professional development, which seriously hinder the high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education.

2.1. Research Subjects, Methods, and Dimensions

Since 2018, Guangdong Province has admitted five batches of publicly funded targeted students, with two batches having graduated and the 2022 graduates completing one year of work. The research focuses on the 2022 graduates from Z University in Guangdong Province, along with students from the 2020 and 2021 cohorts, and their teaching instructors. The primary research methods employed are interviews and observations. Interviews with alumni mainly cover job responsibilities, work status, career paths, and professional recognition, while interviews with current students center on reasons for major selection, academic planning, and university life. Additionally, observations and comparisons are made between targeted and non-targeted students in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts regarding class attendance and activity participation. Insights from course feedback provided by teaching instructors help gain an accurate understanding of the targeted students' learning conditions.

2.2. Research Conclusions

Utilizing NVIVO for data analysis, the author identified the following issues among targeted normal school students:

(1) **Poor Teaching Quality:** Lack of learning motivation and inadequate mastery of professional knowledge and skills. Targeted normal school students are admitted through early admission procedures, with their grades surpassing those of their peers in the same grade and major. They exhibit advantages in aspects such as self-discipline, initiative, and learning ability. However, during the course of their university life and under the protection of the targeted agreement, many of these students gradually become complacent and exhibit a "go with the flow" attitude. Some even lead a passive lifestyle, and their commitment to issues like membership is lackluster. Conversely, non-targeted students, facing an uncertain future, tend to make conscientious academic plans, focusing on skills like penmanship, lesson presentation, and aiming for certificates such as Mandarin proficiency, teacher qualification, and English proficiency tests. Their overall performance in comprehensive assessments and academic performance exceeds that of their targeted counterparts. Additionally, non-targeted students actively cultivate transferable skills and enhance their overall competency.

(2) **Inability to Retain:** Lack of Local Cultural Education, Weak Vocational Beliefs of Rural Teachers. A profession with strong beliefs is the foundation for hopeful prospects in the field of education. The vocational beliefs and local cultural education of rural teachers are closely intertwined. During interviews with the first batch of targeted normal school graduates who entered the workforce in 2022, it was found that upon entering the workplace, most students not only faced the heavy burden of teaching tasks but also had to manage complex administrative duties. This transition from the ivory tower of university life led to negative emotions among many students, particularly when comparing themselves with non-targeted peers, creating a significant disparity and fostering thoughts of wanting to "escape" as soon as possible. However, students with prior experience as student cadres exhibited relatively better stress management skills. Further interviews revealed that while most targeted normal school students have a passion for the teaching profession, many hold the perception that rural education is outdated. They lack an optimistic view of their career prospects as targeted graduates and lack the attachment to rural roots or the courage to serve rural areas. Furthermore, they lack the steadfast belief to dedicate their entire lives to rural education. It was also noticed while studying talent cultivation programs that many institutions lack specialized talent cultivation plans for targeted normal school students, with limited integration of content related to rural education, rural revitalization, and local culture in their curriculum. Scholars have pointed out that due to the urban-oriented focus of publicly funded teacher education, the "rupture of rural memory, cultural identity, and historical roots" has led to their detachment from rural culture and a lack of emotional connection, eventually resulting in an inclination to escape the rural world.

(3) **Lack of Development Opportunities:** Insufficient Sense of Professional Identity, Unclear Individual Career Planning. A sense of professional identity among teacher trainees influences their attitude and orientation towards their own careers. Interviews revealed that a considerable portion of targeted normal school students choose to stay in rural areas for educational work due to pressure to pay penalty fees for contract breach. Many targeted graduates

view involvement in rural education as a stepping stone and do not fully recognize the significance of professional development. Presently, major universities offer career planning courses, but theoretical research and practical exploration of career education for targeted normal school students are still in their nascent stages. Challenges include inadequate theoretical research, incomplete education systems, weak educational efficacy, and a shortage of professional teaching resources. [5] In terms of the current teaching staff, many universities have instructors leading career planning courses, and some of these instructors themselves have uncertain career plans. In terms of course effectiveness, since many targeted students already know their future placements, they often do not find the course particularly useful. They attend the class for the sake of credits, treating it as a task to complete. As for the six-year service commitment period and what to do afterward, most students have not considered these questions. In fact, the career planning course for publicly funded targeted normal school students requires teachers to possess local sentiments rather than just policy familiarity. The course should not only help students understand the current state of rural education but also show them the potential of rural education.

(4) **Strategies for Training Publicly Funded Targeted Normal School Students in the New Era**

The emergence of new objectives for achieving the high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education requires that targeted normal school students not only "find placements" but also "teach well, retain talent, and have opportunities for development." This demands collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders.

2.3. Teaching Well: Strengthen Process Management and Ensure Quality

Addressing issues identified in the survey, such as "high admission standards, passive learning, and low standards for graduating," I believe that institutions should establish rigorous talent cultivation programs for targeted normal school students. Emphasis should be placed on assessing teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and transferable capabilities, while maintaining high exit standards.

(1) **Thorough Learning of Professional Knowledge:** Teacher professional knowledge encompasses a complex fusion of idealistic, realistic, situational, stable, implicit, and explicit views, beliefs, and skills. [6] This implies that becoming a qualified educator involves not only acquiring subject-specific knowledge but also learning about teaching activities. It involves grasping both communicable and inexpressible knowledge, such as insights and intuitions. It's essential for schools to transparently disclose the true academic performance of targeted normal school students. During assessments, standards can be appropriately elevated. Lowering assessment criteria due to concerns about students fulfilling commitments on time should be avoided. An exit mechanism should also be established for students who do not meet assessment standards. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on cultivating all-subject teachers. During summer rural community service activities, it was observed that local parents and students desire targeted students to teach subjects related to arts, physical education, and music. In interviews, more than one elementary school principal expressed their concern that while their schools had good facilities, there were no teachers who could utilize them or teach the students. This points to a relative scarcity of rural teachers specializing in arts, physical education, and music. However, if specialized teachers are exclusively recruited for these subjects, it could create new problems due to resource allocation. This necessitates local universities to pay greater attention to cultivating all-subject targeted normal school students, supplementing rural education with teachers possessing "multi-competency."

(2) **Strengthening Professional Skill Training:** Proficiency in Mandarin, Calligraphy, Lesson Preparation, and Teaching is a basic set of professional skills that a qualified teacher trainee should possess. However, these skills should not remain at a functional level, such as just being able to speak Mandarin or write calligraphy, or presenting in front of a class. They should elevate to speaking Mandarin fluently, writing calligraphy proficiently, and delivering lessons effectively. The transition from being "able" to "proficient" signifies the demand for high-quality student development. To achieve this, institutions should prioritize practical courses for targeted normal school students, with theoretical courses as supplementary. Specialized skills examinations should also be implemented, requiring students to pass relevant assessments before participating in practical experiences or internships. In regular

teaching, apprentice classes and observation classes should be integrated, considering both urban and rural contexts. This allows students to compare educational disparities between urban and rural areas, understand the current state of rural education, and actively contemplate paths for rural education development. Moreover, a teaching skills competition for teacher trainees provides an excellent platform for enhancement. However, the competition format for targeted normal school students and non-targeted students should be distinct, and judging panel members should possess rural education experience or accomplishments.

(3) **Emphasizing Transferable Skill Cultivation:** China's rural education pioneer, Tao Xingzhi, once stated, "Rural teachers should first have the skills of a farmer, secondly possess a scientific mind, and thirdly embody the spirit of societal transformation." [7] This indicates that targeted normal school students should not only possess knowledge and teaching skills, but also understand and integrate into rural communities. They should actively engage in rural social practices and serve rural areas proactively. To address the issue of targeted normal school students struggling with administrative tasks and feeling lost in their pursuits after finding placements, it is suggested to include students' experiences in leadership roles or volunteer service as part of assessments. This approach helps students learn to improve work efficiency through practical experience, manage their mindset, image, and time, and enhance skills in communication, organization, problem-solving, and more. This helps them overcome the limitations of an ivory tower mindset. Institutions should also innovate the content and format of career planning courses for targeted normal school students, focusing on teaching how to become effective rural teachers and contribute to rural revitalization and educational modernization.

2.4. Staying and Sustaining: Implanting Belief Education to Infuse Educational Work with Soul

Dazhao Li once stated, "The purpose of life is to develop one's own life, and human life must constantly strive towards the highest ideals, spread infinitely." As a crucial force for promoting rural revitalization, today's targeted normal school students carry the responsibility not only of disseminating knowledge but also of spreading modern rural civilization, inheriting local culture, and conveying the national will.

(1) **Strengthening Ideal and Belief Education:** Growing into "Four-Have" excellent teachers with ideals and beliefs, moral integrity, solid knowledge, and compassion is a fundamental quality and value pursuit for educators in the new era. The prioritization of ideals and beliefs among the attributes of a "Four-Have" teacher underscores its significance. Without ideals and beliefs, teachers may develop weaknesses. Targeted normal school students are a vital reserve for the rural teaching workforce. They should strive to undertake the important mission of promoting high-quality rural education and selflessly contributing to rural education development. They need to enhance their political awareness, firmly uphold their teaching beliefs, closely link their life plans with national development, contribute to nurturing talent in rural areas, and become "great educators" in the revitalization of rural education in the new era.

(2) **Enhancing Rural Sentiment Education:** As Shuming Liang said, "Chinese culture is based on and values rural areas, making the root of Chinese culture rural." [8] Rural areas are the spiritual homeland of the Chinese people, shaping the spiritual world of the Chinese nation. "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Era Rural Teacher Teams" require that various regions strengthen the construction of teacher training institutions oriented towards rural schools. They should employ methods like targeted enrollment, targeted training, and targeted employment to accurately cultivate local rural teachers. To achieve modernization of rural education, strengthening rural sentiment education for publicly funded targeted normal school students is essential. Pursuing urban-rural integration should not erase the distinctiveness of rural education. This involves developing local curriculum materials, preserving, disseminating, and transforming local culture to subtly enhance targeted normal school students' identification with their rural roots. It also requires intensifying the practice component, enabling targeted normal school students to immerse themselves in rural education. Additionally, the vocational characteristics of "rural education" should be highlighted in talent cultivation programs, fostering targeted students' sense of professional identity.

(3) **Reinforcing Professional Ethics Education:** Teacher professional ethics, or "Shide" in Chinese, constitutes the moral norms, behavioral guidelines, moral concepts, sentiments, and qualities that teachers must adhere to throughout their teaching process.[9] The 2023 Notice on Promoting Teacher Access Query Work issued by the Ministry of Education emphasized implementing the first standard of professional ethics as a target task. This underscores the importance of strong "Shide" in teacher strength. In the course of university education, the objective should be to cultivate "great educators." Teacher ethics education should be incorporated into students' hearts through competitions like speeches and dramas. Schools should promote teacher ethics education, and ensure that the spirit of professional ethics penetrates the inner world of targeted normal school students. Simultaneously, targeted normal school students should transform their individual professional ethics standards and moral qualities into conscious behaviors, embodying virtue in their conduct, study, and teaching.

2.5. Facilitating Development: Ensuring Safety Nets and Providing Learning and Promotion Opportunities

The risk and challenge faced by publicly funded targeted normal school students in being able to "go to" rural areas but not being able to "stay" do not primarily stem from inadequate material support. The root cause lies in the lack of sufficient spiritual support and the inability to envision the prospects of rural education and the development of rural teachers.

(1) **Ensuring Student Enrollment:** Students are the carriers of rural education. In recent years, due to policies like the consolidation and closure of schools, rural students have been forced to migrate to urban areas, leading to a scenario where schools in counties are becoming weaker while urban schools are overcrowded. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, from 2012 to 2021, the number of rural education students has declined from 52.28 million to 28.57 million over the span of ten years. [10] In some rural areas, policies such as school consolidation and educational content reforms have led to the gradual weakening or even alienation of local education, resulting in a vicious cycle of rural student outflow. Without a stable student base, efforts to revitalize rural education are just empty talk. The government needs to exert effort in boosting morale and implementing effective policies. First, they should enhance the dissemination of policies related to rural and educational revitalization to inspire hope. Second, they should publicize the employment prospects for targeted normal school graduates in rural areas, offering a vision of high-quality development in rural education. Lastly, supervising the high-quality completion of teaching tasks by targeted normal school students will provide students and parents who stay a sense of hope and contribute to a virtuous cycle in rural education.

(2) **Ensuring Learning Opportunities:** Leveraging policies such as the "Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan,"[11] which encourages universities and local education departments to provide targeted normal school students with internship opportunities and practical training in high-quality primary and secondary schools, can help students experience the charm of rural culture and dispel misconceptions. Furthermore, advancing rural teacher training reforms is crucial, emphasizing high-quality training tailored to rural school characteristics. This training should encompass rural-specific professional competence. Additionally, training should strengthen pedagogical methods, including comprehensive teaching strategies.

(3) **Ensuring Promotion Pathways:** Revitalizing rural education necessitates a high-quality teaching workforce, and guaranteeing avenues for promotion is a critical measure for building a high-quality teaching staff. The title evaluation system for teachers in urban and rural areas cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. The unique educational environment and contributions of rural teachers are challenging to quantify. Thus, creating differentiated evaluation indicators and offering flexible and supportive incentives for awards and honors will allow targeted normal school students to see the government's determination to revitalize rural education and the prospects for their professional development.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, targeted normal school students play a significant role in advancing rural education and strengthening the cultivation of rural talents. As compulsory education transitions from balanced development to high-quality and balanced development, it is imperative to address the practical issues faced by publicly funded targeted normal school students in terms of "teaching inadequacy," "inability to retain," and "lack of development." Universities should focus on improving process management and setting high standards to solve the "teaching inadequacy" problem. Strengthening belief education, emotional education, and teacher ethics can infuse teaching with soul, thereby making it possible for targeted normal school students to "retain." Government efforts to provide safety nets and promotion opportunities will instill the belief that there is "development" in rural areas, which is crucial for revitalizing rural education.

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