

Article**Building High-Quality Rural Teacher Pool: An Example of Teacher Internship in Zhaoqing University in Western Guangdong****Chih-Fan Chang**College of Literature, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing 526061, China;
allent28@hotmail.com; Tel.: 086-1328-6555-002**Received:** Jun 20, 2023; **Revised:** Jul 12, 2023; **Accepted:** Jul 22, 2023; **Published:** Dec 30, 2023

Abstract: Students majoring in education at Zhaoqing University have contributed as teachers to elementary to high schools in western Guangdong, China. We surveyed students majoring in Chinese language and literature education at Zhaoqing University to collect their internship experiences and perspectives on work, teaching, life, and skill development. The data was analyzed to identify the reasons that prevented young teachers from staying in rural schools. We combined relevant theories and policies with the analysis result to provide recommendations for higher education institutions, internship schools, and the government on the internship program to retain more young teachers in rural areas. These recommendations help to build high-quality rural teacher pools, revitalize rural communities through the improved quality of education, and contribute to Chinese modernization.

Keywords: Social research, Rural teachers, High-quality teacher teams, Internship, Rural revitalization

1. Introduction

The revitalization of rural areas has been a crucial national development strategy for China, which is dependent on providing high-quality education in rural areas. Given the key role of teachers in imparting appropriate education in rural areas, Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party emphasized the importance of the needs of rural teachers for improvements in salaries, health care, and protection of rights when he visited teachers in Shizhu Tujia Autonomous County, China (Miller, L. C., 2012). He also emphasized the importance of improving the teachers' political, social, and occupational statuses. This recognition helps to enhance the social reputation of the teachers in rural areas. A high-quality pool of rural teachers fosters education in rural areas and thus contributes to the revitalization of rural areas. Students who major in education at Zhaoqing University have worked in schools in rural areas of western Guangdong after their graduation (White, S. et al., 2012). Over time, the quality of teachers in rural areas has improved as more graduates have joined in the pool of teachers. However, the rural-urban gaps and the lack of education resources in rural areas result in the deficiency of young teachers in rural areas, and the number of young teachers is still decreasing. Therefore, we studied internship programs in rural areas of western Guangdong for students who study Chinese language and literature education at Zhaoqing University and identified problems during their internships. The results were used to propose suggestions for the improvement of the education system in rural areas (Huberman, M., 1989).

2. Data Collection*2.1. Participants*

The participants were students who majored in Chinese language and literature education at Zhaoqing University in 2018 and 2019. Those admitted in 2018 had completed their teacher preparation program (TPP), whereas those admitted in 2019 underwent an internship at the time of this study. A questionnaire survey was administered to the students. 277 valid responses were returned from them. 258 female (93.14%) and 19 male students (6.86%) participated in the survey. 175 (63.18%) and 102 (36.82%) students interned inside and outside western Guangdong, respectively. The number of male students with the major is lower than that of female students, leading to a significant gender disparity. The majority of internships were concentrated in Zhaoqing's Deqing, Fengkai, and Huaiji Counties in western Guangdong, Guangzhou, and Zhongshan in Guangdong, China. The survey results were analyzed to make recommendations.

*2.2. Methodology**2.2.1. Questionnaire Survey*

We developed a questionnaire titled “Current Status and Development of Intern Teachers in Western Guangdong” based on the collected information related to the internship of the student and a literature review. The questionnaire included 24 items asking about teaching practice, work, and life of the interns. We consulted experts to modify and finalize the questionnaire based on their feedback.

2.2.2. Online and Offline Interviews

After obtaining the questionnaire survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with six interns both online and offline to explore the factors that affected their decisions to stay or leave rural areas (Seidman, I.,1998). Four interns who were admitted to the university in 2019 were interviewed online through WeChat, and two interns who were admitted to the university in 2018 were interviewed offline. All interviews were recorded and photographed with the interviewee’s permission.

3. Result and Analysis

Detailed information on the survey data can be found in our Research Report on the Current Status and Development of Intern Teachers in Western Guangdong. We presented the analysis results related to the teaching practice, work, and life of the interns as follows.

3.1. Work

The work in the survey referred to the teaching activities in primary and secondary schools. The interns had completed their relevant courses before their internship. The intern was involved in activities such as classroom observation, assisting in teaching, conducting independent lessons, designing lesson plans, reflecting on teaching experiences, and engaging in subject research. Through experience and reflection, they could enhance teaching skills and an understanding of teaching theories. Teacher internships are crucial in nurturing qualified educators. The analysis results in this study provide various aspects of the interns’ work during their TPP in rural western Guangdong.

3.1.1. Major-Subject Discrepancy

Several interns felt a significant discrepancy between their studies in the college and the subjects they taught during their TPP. This mismatch indicated that their teaching assignments did not align with their major (Miller, L. C.,2012). Furthermore, the majority of interns were assigned to teach subjects that were not their academic expertise. Such subjects encompassed a wide range of disciplines, such as ideology and politics, history, science, and art. The assignment to teach multiple subjects was prevalent in the region of western Guangdong, which highlighted the scarcity of qualified teachers in the relevant area (Allen, J. et al., 2004).

This situation presents challenges and implications. Firstly, interns may struggle to deliver high-quality instruction when teaching subjects that do not match their academic background and expertise. Such a situation hinders the effective learning experiences of students and impacts their academic performance. Secondly, the widespread practice of multiple-subject teaching leads to a lack of specialization and depth in the educational process. This approach may result in a superficial understanding of the subjects of students, affecting the overall educational outcomes. Moreover, the shortage of teachers in western Guangdong, as reflected by multiple-subject teaching causes more issues in the region's education system. It is imperative to provide students with well-rounded and comprehensive learning experiences.

3.1.2.Undertaking Work Other than Internship Tasks

Many interns reported extra responsibilities during their TPP such as office duties, administrative work, and assisting full-time teachers, which burdened the interns.

3.1.3. Teaching Hours

The teaching hours of the interns varied depending on the schools they were deployed. Some of them were assigned a few teaching hours, whereas others were required to teach 20 hours a week. As a result, the interns had markedly different internship experiences. Those with a demanding teaching schedule were stressed, whereas those with limited teaching hour requirements gained little from their internships. Teaching hours are critical in internships for students.

3.1.4.Unequal Pay

Most of the interns reported disproportionate pay relative to their workload. Despite the differences in workload, all interns received nearly the same pay for their internships, which was unfair to those with higher workloads.

3.2. Teaching

Teaching-related items were surveyed from various aspects of the teaching of interns.

3.2.1. Diverse and Effective Teaching Methods

The teaching methods adopted by the interns in schools were mostly verbal, such as lectures, questions-and-answer sessions, and recitations. Their teaching focused on imparting knowledge and engaging in questions-and-answer interactions with students. They also included practice and recitation activities to aid students in memorization. The majority of interns implemented comprehensive teaching and could adapt to various teaching methods. Their teaching capacity was demonstrated by their natural and calm delivery as well as their logical presentation of knowledge. However, several interns reported difficulty in managing the teaching pace and various teaching methods, which may be attributed to their lack of teaching experience. Thus, the lack of teaching experience of the interns presented challenges despite their teaching capacity.

3.2.2. Lesson Preparation

The interns were committed to their preclass preparation and assigned work. Under the guidance of their teachers, the interns consulted textbooks and relevant materials to design and implement their lesson plans based on their learning (Clarke, A. et al., 2005). Nevertheless, their ability to reflect on and be creative with their knowledge was limited, and most of their teaching content was based on online materials.

3.2.3. Students with Poor Foundation

The interns reported a lack of order and low levels of proactiveness among students in class, which indicated low motivation of the students toward learning (Rice, P. L., et al., 1999). Therefore, it was important for the interns to foster the students' interest in learning. According to the feedback of the interns, many students in the rural schools were "left behind," that is, their families were not with them. As a result, students lacked support and guidance from their families, which resulted in their lack of motivation to learn and low academic performance.

3.3. Life

The following analysis results were related to the life-related items of the interns.

3.3.1. Mediocre Housing Conditions

Most interns were dissatisfied with their housing during the internship and considered it to be inappropriate (Seidman, I., 1998). They expected the housing arrangement for teachers to be of higher quality than the student housing at their university. Only a small number of the interns were satisfied with their housing.

3.3.2. Food

The majority of the interns reported that the schools were unresponsive to their complaints about food quality and that the cost of food in the school cafeteria for teachers was too high (Seidman, I., 1998). The daily allowance provided to the interns was not sufficient to pay the costs of food in the cafeterias. Therefore, most of them had to seek cheaper meals on their own. These financial problems experienced by the interns posed additional challenges and stressors for them.

3.4. Teacher Preparation Program

The following analysis results were related to skill-related items and revealed whether the curriculum and teaching skill development at Zhaoqing University could equip the interns to handle various situations during their internships.

3.4.1. Relevance of University Courses in Internships

Most interns perceived that the course at the university was beneficial to their internships. Most interns believed that every course was helpful for their internship. For example, in the study of literature, they could learn literature, language, and

communication skills (Shulman, L.,1987). They engaged in creative teaching for language arts or literature courses. An understanding of literary analysis and critical thinking helped them develop thought-provoking discussions and activities for their students. In education-related courses, they benefited from learning theoretical knowledge and practical teaching skills. These courses covered pedagogy, educational psychology, classroom management, and instructional strategies. As a result, interns could apply learned principles during their practicum to develop effective lesson plans, manage classrooms, and interact with students in more impactful ways.

They found that such courses for practice and the core competencies were beneficial for their future career (White, S. et al., 2012). The importance and effectiveness of such courses helped interns develop the necessary skills for their future careers. The university's curriculum was appropriate and met the requirements for teachers' basic skills. However, the subject-specific introductory courses were found to impact the interns' teaching practice limitedly because they had limited connection with the content taught in the internship schools. Instead, these courses contributed mainly to the cultural literacy of these interns themselves.

3.4.2. Inadequate Teaching and Communication Skills

Despite basic courses on teaching and communication skills at the university, most interns demonstrated insufficient capacity in these courses. This insufficiency was attributed to the gap between theory and practice and revealed the limited contribution of practice-related courses to teaching practice due to the lack of training components in these courses.

4. Suggestions

Based on the survey results and a review of the literature on teaching practice and education policies, we proposed the following suggestions for interns, higher education institutions, internship schools, and the government.

4.1. For Interns

Interns must take courses on specialized knowledge to establish a strong foundation for their future teaching career. Moreover, they need to observe the teaching methods of their teachers in class and internalize traits that may benefit their future teaching (Allen, J. et al., 2004). Before their internships, the interns need to practice teaching activities in their classrooms or participate in teaching skills competitions to translate the learned theories to teaching practice and further refine their teaching skills. During internships, interns must seek advice from their teachers or observe and learn from other teachers in the internship schools. They must hone their classroom management skills and resourcefulness in class, learn to pace their teaching, and adjust their teaching style based on their students' reactions in class.

4.2. For Higher Education Institutions

The method of assigning schools to interns in this study was drawing lots, which was debated seriously. If drawing lots is used for school assignment, schools where the dialects are spoken cannot be assigned to interns who are accustomed to them. The gender ratio of interns must be considered for the safety of interns. Moreover, interns' personal aspirations must be considered when determining the length of their internships. For example, several interns may have plans to pursue a graduate degree or take civil service examinations, and a one-semester-long internship may disrupt these plans. Higher education institutions must agree with internship schools to specify that the internships be focused on teaching, teaching tasks be delegated equally, the subjects interns teach be matched with their expertise as much as possible, and the interns should receive appropriate teaching skill training. Moreover, higher education institutions must have an overview of the internship schools before internships start to ensure the interns' safety and that their everyday needs can be met.

To meet the increasing societal requirements for teachers, higher education institutions must adopt a flexible approach to talent training to strengthen the connection between interns and their high school students. Therefore, the institutions must prioritize modules related to teachers' education ethics, teaching practice, and core competences in their curriculum. The purpose of these courses is to expand interns' knowledge on teaching theories, improve their teaching capacity, and hone their basic teaching skills.

Apart from the traditional theory-based teaching model, higher education institutions need to provide opportunities for interns to practice teaching in class, which is crucial to their teaching skill development. The institutions can arrange learning sessions at internship schools prior to the start of internships, allowing interns to gain insights into the teaching situations and methods used in these schools. Alternatively, the institutions can introduce internship schools and the characteristics of students and guide the interns to adopt the appropriate teaching strategies to help them adapt to the schools they intern at. Effective guidance from teachers is crucial to interns' adaptation to their internships, too. Higher education institutions must appoint highly qualified teachers from each department to offer guidance, professional advice, and systemic assistance to interns as they transition from being student to

becoming interns. These mentors can guide interns in their roles as instructors of specialized knowledge and providers of ideological education. Furthermore, these mentors can provide emotional support guidance to interns, which could help the interns manage their stress and adapt to the new teaching environment.

4.3. For Internship School

Internship schools must consider interns' majors when assigning tasks to them. A match between an intern's expertise and the subjects to teach enhances the quality of teaching and enables the intern to accumulate relevant teaching experience and develop specialized skills, which benefits their future career. Once interns complete their training, the internship schools must consider assigning varying amounts of work to the interns based on the performance they demonstrate during the training. However, the schools must ensure that work is delegated as appropriately as possible such that every intern has a chance to teach in class. Furthermore, the schools must avoid overloading or underloading interns to reduce their stress levels. Internship schools need to improve the housing and food arrangements for interns. Well-furnished dormitories and free meals need to be supplied to interns to meet their basic everyday needs. In cases where the schools cannot provide free meals, they must increase the food allowances for interns, which may help relieve the stress that interns experience in their everyday lives and improve their internship experience. Internship schools must adopt a mentor model by assigning a teacher to each intern as a mentor to guide them in their teaching work and allow interns to observe how experienced teachers prepare for and conduct classes, which may help the interns adapt to their role as teachers (Clarke, A. et al., 2005).

4.4. For Government

To alleviate the financial stress of the interns, the government needs to increase the subsidy for intern teachers. Moreover, the governments need to sign agreements with interns to reassure them that they are appointed to teach subjects that match their majors and expertise considering their majors and expertise (Hill, J. et al., 2001). These incentives can motivate the interns to stay in rural areas, thereby mitigating the shortage of teachers. To improve the teaching conditions and quality in rural areas, the government must implement related policies and measures that enhance rural teachers' compensation packages. Most students in rural areas in western Guangdong are "left behind," with their parents away from them for work. Therefore, the government must foster economically beneficial features for the rural areas for revitalization. Moreover, to address the cause of leaving parents, additional job opportunities must be created in western Guangdong. When the children have their parents at home, they become more disciplined in their learning, leading to higher academic performance and thus reducing the teachers' teaching pressure.

5. Conclusions

We delved into the multifaceted challenges confronted by students majoring in education at Zhaoqing University and experiencing teacher internships in rural western Guangdong. We also offered recommendations to mitigate these challenges and retain young educators in rural regions. The significance of rural education in China's broader rural revitalization strategy was reviewed by exploring the pivotal role teachers play in this context. Specifically, the contribution of students majoring in education at Zhaoqing University was underscored as a major source of teachers for rural schools in western Guangdong. It is necessary to solve a shortage of young teachers with persistent issues and improve the quality of teachers.

227 students, mainly female students majoring in Chinese language and literature education at Zhaoqing University were invited to the survey of this study. Most internships were experienced in western Guangdong with several placements occurring in non-western Guangdong regions. The survey result was analyzed in several dimensions. For "Work", academic-major mismatches between interns and their assigned subjects led to teaching challenges. Many interns had additional responsibilities other than their primary teaching roles, resulting in heightened stress. The variations in teaching hours among interns led to different internship experiences, and unequal pay distribution relative to workload further exacerbated the challenges. In "Teaching," interns displayed a variety of teaching methods, primarily centered on verbal communication. Adequate lesson preparation was commonplace, but they encountered difficulties motivating students, particularly those categorized as "left-behind children." In "Life", interns were dissatisfied with housing, food quality, and costs. Financial strains were added to their stress. The "Teacher Preparation Program" highlighted that university courses contributed to their internships, especially those featuring practical elements. However, despite taking courses on teaching and communication skills, most interns exhibited limited proficiency in these areas.

To address these challenges, several recommendations were proposed. Interns were encouraged to pursue specialized knowledge, observe experienced teachers, and engage in teaching practice before internships actively (Gay, L. R. et al., 2009). Higher education institutions need to consider interns' aspirations when assigning placements, ensure safety, and prioritize modules related to teaching ethics and core competencies. Internship schools must align intern expertise with teaching assignments, fairly delegate work, enhance housing and food arrangements, and implement mentorship programs. The government needs to increase subsidies for interns, align majors with expertise, and enhance compensation packages for rural teachers. Additionally, it is necessary to create job opportunities in western Guangdong, alleviating the need for parents to leave their children behind.

The results of this study reveal the challenges faced by education majors during their internships in rural western Guangdong. Recommendations tailored to interns in this study are expected to be executed by higher education institutions, internship schools, and the government to enhance the retention rate of young teachers in rural areas.

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