

# *Comparison and Implication of Teacher Qualification System in Middle and Primary Schools between China and Finland*

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**Abstract:** Application, accreditation, and examination of teacher qualification is the key to ensuring the quality of teachers, which plays a fundamental, and significant role. Given the situation in China, there are still some problems in the current teacher qualification system, such as too extensive application scope, loose restrictions on majors, easy examinations, and simple recognition procedures, which also lead to the uneven level of teachers between individuals and imbalance between regions. The qualification of teachers in Finland is stricter than that in China in terms of academic background, majors, and other requirements, as the qualification examination of teachers in Finland pays more attention to the examinees' research ability, comprehensive quality, and professional motivation, etc. These practices provide a good reference for teacher training, and assessment in China. Individual growth is inseparable from teachers' cultivation; the development of a school relies on teachers' efforts; social progress can't be achieved without teachers' contributions, and a country's prosperity also depends on teachers' strength. The teacher qualification system is a specific professional license system implemented by the state for teachers, which includes the basic conditions of teacher qualification, the principles of qualification recognition, loss and revocation, and the procedures of teacher qualification recognition<sup>[1]</sup>. It has specified the qualification classification, requirements, examinations, and identification procedures, which guarantee the overall quality of teachers. Many countries in the world have strict provisions on the qualification standards of teachers. Compared with the qualification system of primary and secondary school teachers in Finland, China still has many shortcomings in this aspect. As one of the most advanced countries in the world, Finland has accumulated rich experience in the application, examination, and certification of teacher qualification, which offers a reference for China.

## **1. Comparative Analysis of Application Requirements for Teacher Qualification between China and Finland**

As a developed country in terms of education, Finland has a high quality of education, balanced educational resources, and qualified teachers. This is not only related to the government's great deal of emphasis on education but also the teacher qualification application system with a high threshold

and requirements <sup>[2]</sup>. Both Finland and China have certain requirements on education background, major and basic ability of teachers in applying for teacher qualification, and both attach great importance to the moral and psychological quality of teachers, but Finland has a higher application threshold.

### **1.1. Stricter Restrictions on Applicants' Major in Finland than in China**

In Finland, all teachers in primary and secondary schools and kindergartens are enrolled in normal colleges and universities, and can only teach after obtaining the teacher qualification. To enter normal colleges, they have to possess a high school diploma and take part in the national examination to be selected by such colleges. After admission, only excellent teachers can join the line of reserve teachers after being certified. According to the Evaluation Report on University Student Selection, From National Application to National Selection -- Development of University Student Selection, Finland has established the National Selection Cooperation Network in the field of education (VAKAVA). According to the Helsinki Post, there are a total of 8 comprehensive universities with teachers' majors in Finland, and the annual admission rate of freshmen is only about 5%-10% [3]. For example, in 2017, 6,500 high school graduates applied for primary school teachers in Finland, but only 900 were enrolled, with a reported enrollment ratio of 7: 1. Among the 1,760 students who applied to the V äskyl äInstitute of Education, only 80 were admitted, with the enrollment ratio as low as 22:1, which indicates the fierce competition for teacher qualifications. The purpose of teacher selection is to seek students with the potential to be quality teachers and select the most suitable applicants to enter and serve the teaching industry [4]. In China, due to the large population, a huge gap between urban and rural areas, uneven regional development, and a prominent shortage of teachers in some regions [5], the restrictions on teachers' majors are relaxed. Both normal students and non-normal students can obtain the teacher qualification certificate, and special-post teachers in some remote places are even allowed to engage in work first before having a certificate [6]. Although the above measures have alleviated the shortage of teachers in China to some extent, the quality of the teachers is difficult to guarantee, so some unqualified teachers are exposed from time to time.

### **1.2. Higher Applicants' Qualification in Finland than Those in China**

To become a normal school student in Finland, a high school diploma is a must. To become a kindergarten teacher, a bachelor's degree is required, while to become a teacher in primary and secondary schools, a master's degree is necessary, which means 100% of teachers in primary and secondary schools in Finland are master's graduates [ 7 ]. However, although the educational requirements for applying for teacher qualification in China have increased significantly since the beginning of the 21st century, the overall requirements are relatively low. Applicants for kindergarten teachers need only technical secondary school or junior college; those for primary school teachers need junior college or bachelor's degree; junior high school and senior high school teachers need a bachelor's degree [8]. Except for some developed regions or schools, most middle schools have no mandatory requirements for teachers' master's degrees. According to the statistics on the education background of primary and secondary school teachers by China's Ministry of Education in 2020, there are nearly 6.4 million primary school teachers; 3.8 million junior high school teachers [9]; and 1.9 million senior high school teachers in China, among which there are only 100,000 primary school teachers, 150,000 junior high school teachers and 220,000 high school teachers with master degrees [10]. This indicates a low proportion of teachers with master's degrees. Teachers cannot be measured only by their educational background or diplomas, but the improvement of their overall educational background helps to improve the quality and level of education in China.

### **1.3. Applicants' Stronger Professional Identity in Finland than That in China**

Professional identity refers to an individual's goal, attitude, and evaluation of occupation, as well as his views on its social value and other factors. According to a survey by the Finnish newspaper Helsinki News, the teaching profession is highly respected and recognized in Finland, and many young people regard it as their only goal in life [11]. Finland attaches great importance to the professional identity of teachers' qualification applicants and even takes the professional identity of teachers as a rigid index in the application requirements [12]. In the interview process, the examiner will focus on assessing whether an applicant has the psychological and moral qualities to become a teacher, his understanding of the teaching profession, and the purpose and original intention of becoming a teacher. The reason to be a teacher is not because of the salary, but because of the career pursuit of having professional autonomy, helping students grow, and realizing their value. China also stipulates that teachers should love education in the Regulations on Teacher Qualification, but little attention is paid when applicants are examined and inspected, and relevant effective measures and means are lacking. Therefore, although the number of people who have obtained a teaching certificate in China is increasing, a majority of people consider teaching as a means to make a living, and few of them will figure teaching as a lifelong pursuit or a noble career.

## **2. Comparative Analysis of Teacher Qualification Examination System between China and Finland**

The teacher qualification examination system is an important standard to evaluate whether a teacher candidate is qualified for the teaching profession, which can reflect his research ability and educational ability. Whether the examination system is sound and perfect will greatly affect the quality and level of teachers selected. China and Finland have similar differences in the content, form, and procedure of the examination.

### **2.1. The Written Test of Finnish Teacher Qualification Focuses on Multidisciplinary Integration**

The written test of Finnish teacher qualification is more difficult, wider in scope, and more comprehensive in ability assessment. Since the 1970s, Finland has enacted a series of educational regulations, such as the Law on Teacher Education, the Report of the Teacher Training Committee, and the Decree on Educational Science and Teacher Education Degree. Every teacher candidate needs to pass a strict entrance examination which is divided into two rounds: the national preparatory examination, and the college admissions examination. The exam encompasses 10 subjects and candidates must choose at least 4 subjects. Except for the test of mother tongue is mandatory, the other 3 subjects are optional, including second language, foreign language, mathematics or history, ethics, psychology, biology, geography, and philosophy. including the second national language, foreign language, mathematics or history, ethics, psychology, biology, geography, and philosophy [13]. As Finland aims to cultivate general teachers, promoting interdisciplinary integration and project learning, candidates are required to prepare for various subjects and disciplines. In terms of language, they have to learn three languages, and natural science and social science are involved in the selected test subjects. Therefore, the exam focuses on the candidate's knowledge integration, transfer of learning, and research capabilities. In comparison, China trains subject teachers, advocating teaching by subject, which means interdisciplinary learning is not required. Language is only required for candidates of foreign language majors while Chinese is enough for other candidates. Moreover, the written test is relatively easy. According to the Ministry of Education of the Interim Measures for Qualification Examination for Primary and Secondary School Teachers, the written qualification examination for primary school teachers mainly includes two subjects: comprehensive quality and

education knowledge and ability. Based on this, another subject, discipline knowledge and ability, is added for middle school teachers. The written tests mostly include quiz questions and multiple-choice questions, focusing on the understanding and memory ability of applicants for teacher qualifications.

## **2.2. Finnish Teacher Qualification Interviews Pay More Attention to Comprehensive Quality**

In the interview process, both countries conduct structured tests and simulated teaching, but there are subtle differences. Finland focuses on the comprehensive quality of teachers, while China put emphasis on the basic knowledge and skills of teachers. First of all, the questions in the given material in Finland are more specific and flexible, which gives candidate teachers enough time to think. During the 20-minute interview, candidates select written material and put forward their ideas based on the content. The questions include: if you're taking students to a picnic in the countryside and need ice to keep food cold, do you put the ice on the top or the bottom?" To answer the question, only an applicant who knows that cold air moves downward because of its density can give the correct explanation. Situational questions in China focus on educational tact and on-the-spot response, and many of the questions are broad, such as "What should you do about puppy love?", "What should you do if students are biased against teachers?". As candidates only have a few minutes to ponder, they are unable to answer the questions with complete logic. Secondly, the simulated teaching of the interview in Finland is also different from the trial teaching in China. In China, the trial teaching and the writing of teaching plans are all completed by individuals, which emphasizes the design and interpretation of teaching plans and attaches importance to their exam-taking ability. However, simulation teaching in Finland requires group cooperation, which not only evaluates individual logical ability and expression ability but also stresses individual organizational ability and coordination ability. Such qualities are all important for qualified teachers [14].

## **2.3. The Finnish Teacher Qualification Examination Attaches More Importance to Professional Motivation**

The motivation and purpose of applying for the teaching qualification and the evaluation of the applicant's commitment to education are one of the most important parts of the interview for the Finnish teaching qualification examination [15]. This selection procedure makes the applicant aware of the educational responsibility, moral mission, and dedication before entering the normal college, which is the premise of being a really good teacher. Therefore, what applicants pursue is not a high salary and good treatment, but the trust and respect of society; teaching is not only a career to support the family, but also an ideal belief, for which lifelong efforts should be made. In China's interview, applicants' career motivation isn't explicitly asked. Although some examinees may be asked casually, their educational commitment won't be seen as a formal assessment.

## **3. Implications of Finnish Teacher Qualification System to China**

### **3.1. Raise the Threshold of Teacher Qualification in China to Select Excellent Talents from the Source**

Due to the low threshold for teacher qualification in China, many students of different majors or disciplines other than teaching apply for such qualifications, which makes it not as professional as other certifications such as doctor's license and lawyer's license. This prompts the public to question the quality of education, teachers, and teaching and anyone can cast doubts on teaching as long as it is mentioned. Conversely, the high status of Finnish teachers depends on their high quality, which is partly due to the great difficulty and high threshold of the teacher qualification recognition system

[16]. Therefore, when there is a sufficient teacher reserve, China should raise the threshold of teacher qualification recognition. Non-normal majors and disciplines should be limited and students of the normal major are able to apply for the qualification. At the same time, for quite a long time, the admission scores of normal colleges and universities and normal majors are not high, so a considerable number of students choose such majors because they do not reach the threshold of ideal majors, or temporarily have no ideals and goals [17]. Thus, it is important to strengthen the training of normal students, improve the investment in normal colleges and universities, and promote the status and treatment of teachers, so that teachers can be respected in society, and only students who have the willingness, capability, and talent can become normal students.

### **3.2. Improve the Difficulty of Chinese Teacher Qualification Examination and Optimize the Content of Written Examination and Interview**

As Finnish primary and secondary schools pay attention to interdisciplinary teaching and project-based learning, the content of the written test for teachers is not limited to a certain discipline, and it aims to evaluate the research ability and thinking ability of teachers, so the questions are flexible and comprehensive. However, most of the written test questions of Chinese teachers' qualification focus on memory, and understanding, and even have standard answers, which can hardly reflect teachers' comprehensive analysis, application, and research ability. As a result, in terms of the written examination for primary school teachers, China can draw reference from the selection of Finnish general teachers to strengthen the assessment of teachers' thinking quality, which means an interdisciplinary comprehensive examination will be better than the test on a certain subject. During the interview, Chinese interviewers focus on applicants' theoretical knowledge and examination skills, so applicants have to simulate teaching all by themselves. China can draw on Finland's experience of team cooperation in the interview which examines applicants' basic knowledge and skills, and pay attention to the team cooperation ability, communication ability, organization and coordination ability, and so on. China can also take some measures, or set up some questions to test candidates' professional identity, as many normal universities in China have enrolled commissioned normal students whose tuition and fees are exempt for four years. However, they have to be a teacher in the specified area for up to six years, after the deadline they can be enrolled in the local teacher staffing system [18]. Moreover, the examination of the motivation of applying for teachers and the oath of the teaching profession can be added to the teacher qualification examination so that the candidates can understand the responsibilities and missions of teachers, and those who love children and have faith in education can be selected.

### **3.3. Implement the Education Practice System for Non-normal Students and Increase the Practice Inspection Mechanism**

The internship is an important educational practice for all normal students before work. Finland attaches great importance to the teacher practice system which runs through the whole five-year learning process and divides the practice into three stages: elementary, middle, and high school. At each stage, different goals and contents are set, so that normal university students can experience the practice from the beginning to the end, from the easy part to the difficult one [19]. In the Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (Trial) issued by China in 2012, normal university students are required to have 18 weeks of educational probation and internship. However, it is unreasonable for non-normal students to obtain a teaching certificate without any internship and practical teaching experience. Therefore, it should be stipulated that non-normal students must engage in the internship or teaching practice before the interview, which aims to shift the selection from focusing on theory to practice, and during that time, the applicants' learning ability, teaching attitudes, and interaction

between teachers and students must be closely observed to assess their ability to become a good teacher in the future. In this way, some students can be eliminated who have no teaching experience, do not love education or students, and such wrong ideas that non-normal students can take the teacher qualification examination at will and pass it easily can be abandoned.

#### 4. Balance the Ratio of Male and Female Teachers to Optimize the Gender Structure of Teachers

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education in 2020, the proportion of male teachers in China's primary school, middle school, and high school teachers is 28.83%, 41.19%, and 44.37% respectively [20]. The imbalance of more women than men has always been a drawback of the gender structure of Chinese teachers, which is particularly acute in primary schools and kindergartens. On the contrary, Finland places a high value on the balance between male and female teachers in teacher selection, especially in trying to attract male students to apply for teaching. In order to ensure the enrollment ratio of male teachers, Finland once directly stipulated the enrollment ratio of male and female teachers and gave a male compulsory quota. Although these quotas have been abolished with the enactment of the Act on Equality between Men and Women, Finland has still offered preferential treatment to male students, such as increasing the criteria for military service and reducing the criteria for candidates' experience with children. Today, Finland has one of the most balanced teacher gender ratios in the world [21]. Therefore, China should take effective measures as soon as possible to attract more male teachers to teach in primary and secondary schools and adjust the structural ratio of male and female teachers in those schools.

Drawing on Finland's experience in this aspect, China should on the one hand learn from Finland's teacher qualification system and on the other hand, take its basic national education conditions into account to develop the teachers' qualification system with Chinese characteristics, select and cultivate a large number of qualified teachers with lofty beliefs, moral character, abundant knowledge, and a kind heart, which will meet the needs of China's educational development.

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