

Dilemmas and Strategies of Volunteer Teaching Internships in Local Normal Universities in China—Based on a Survey of Chinese Language and Literature (Normal) Major Interns at M College

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Keywords: Local normal universities; Volunteer teaching practice; Dilemmas; Strategies

Abstract: The main difficulties encountered by interns from local normal universities in their volunteer teaching internships are excessive workloads leading to high pressure, generally harsh internship conditions and inconvenient living conditions, deficiencies in the interns' own abilities, low satisfaction with internships, and low willingness to remain as teachers in rural areas. The reasons for these difficulties are the contrast between urban sentiments and rural realities that cause psychological discomfort, the disparity between high expectations and low treatment in rural areas that lead to a sense of injustice, the lack of educational literacy and the gap formed by professional ideals that lead to a lack of professional confidence, and the lack of effective guidance during internships. Improvements in the volunteer teaching internships of local normal universities should involve several aspects: cultivating normal students' awareness of serving rural education at the grassroots level; improving the conditions for serving rural education to ensure the living needs of interns; strengthening teaching skills training and guidance before the internships of normal students; improving the construction and management of the internship system; and reasonably arranging internship tasks.

1. Introduction

In July 2007, the Ministry of Education issued the “Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Vigorously Promoting Teacher Training Internship Work of Volunteer Teaching for Normal University Students” (Teachers [2007] No. 4), which argues that “teacher training internships are an indispensable important link in the training of primary and secondary school teachers”[1,2]. Conducting teacher training internships is an effective measure to promote teacher education reform, strengthen the practical teaching of teaching students, and improve the quality of teacher training. It

is necessary to strengthen teacher education, guide teaching students to go deep into the grassroots level, understand the national conditions, and enhance the sense of social responsibility and mission. Teacher training internships can connect teaching colleges with primary and secondary schools, promote the integration of theory and practice, and better serve basic education. Conducting teacher training internships is also conducive to helping rural primary and secondary schools improve teachers' ability and promote the comprehensive implementation of quality education. Local education administrative departments and schools at all levels should organize, cooperate, promote, and implement teacher training internships. Teaching colleges should encourage senior teaching students to conduct educational internships in primary and secondary schools for at least one semester.

However, for various reasons, it is becoming increasingly difficult for teaching students from local normal universities to conduct educational internships in urban schools, especially in city schools with better conditions, strong teaching staff, high demands for educational quality, and strict control over teacher quality. It is difficult to provide teaching students from local normal universities with comprehensive internships for a complete semester. Therefore, teaching students from local normal universities usually go to educationally weaker county towns or even underdeveloped rural schools or remote mountainous areas for educational internships. The development of education in China remains uneven, and education in rural and township areas is still relatively undeveloped. There is a shortage of teachers, especially young teachers. In addition, in recent years, many female teachers have taken maternity leave due to the relaxation of the family planning policy, and primary and secondary schools are willing to provide internship positions and opportunities for teaching students from local normal universities.

The volunteer teaching internships of teaching students have played a positive role in improving the structural deviation of teachers in rural schools. They are an effective way to develop rural education and improve the strength of rural teachers and have made enormous contributions to the revitalization and development of rural education. Volunteer teaching internships for one semester are also of special importance to interns. After a semester of systematic and complete exercise in teaching and class teacher management work, interns' level of education and teaching and their ability to deal with practical work difficulties are greatly improved. This kind of systematic and complete exercise has a clear effect on the growth of interns.

However, as the first parties in volunteer teaching internships, their satisfaction with these internships directly affects the educational effect of the internship school. What are teaching students' opinions about volunteer teaching internships? Are they satisfied with volunteer teaching internships? If they continue to conduct volunteer teaching internships when they are dissatisfied, they will bring negative emotions to the classroom, which will affect the quality of education and teaching. Their voices should be considered and valued by internship schools, the government and colleges and universities. The participants in this study were teaching students who had completed a semester of volunteer teaching internships in townships or rural areas. The aim was to understand the real voices of volunteer teaching interns and provide a reference to improve the management and policies of volunteer teaching internships. The survey was conducted in the form of distributed questionnaires and interviews, and 277 valid questionnaires were received. Among them, there were 258 female interns, accounting for 93.14% of the total number, and 19 male interns, accounting for 6.86% of the total number. The survey results showed that there are still many problems in the related policies and management of volunteer teaching internships that need to be improved.

2. Challenges faced by student teachers from local teacher education institutions

2.1. Student teachers are overburdened and stressed

2.1.1. Interns are required to teach several subjects

Due to a general shortage of teaching resources in schools hosting student teachers, there is often a lack of full-time teachers for many subjects. Interns, in addition to their major subjects, are sometimes forced to teach multiple subjects, resulting in a heavy workload. The survey results show that in addition to teaching Chinese, 51.96% of student teachers are responsible for other subjects. Among them, 46.88% teach political education, 43.75% teach science, 18.75% teach physical education, 19.51% teach art, 21.95% teach music, 12.2% teach history, 7.32% teach information technology, 12.2% teach science, and 4.88% teach geography, with mathematics and English accounting for 3.13% each. Interns, whose knowledge is highly specialized, are not trained as generalist teachers. They can manage some subjects but find others very challenging.

2.1.2. Interns are overloaded with temporary tasks

The distribution of tasks in internship schools is sometimes unreasonable, and some teachers are overloaded and need the assistance of interns. The survey showed that 89% of interns take on the duties of a homeroom teacher. In addition, 66.67% of interns assist other teachers with temporary tasks. Because interns hold the lowest position in schools, leaders and senior teachers often assign them office work and other temporary chores. A total of 56.86% of interns had to undertake office work and temporary tasks and usually did not dare to refuse.

2.1.3. Rural education lacks social support

Interns generally feel that rural primary and secondary schools lack adequate social support. Many tasks that are not part of the school's responsibility are allocated to the school. A total of 64.71% of interns believed there are too many forms of inspections and evaluations, and 54.9% believed that the average working time is too long. Eighty percent of interns believed that students are not diligent, academic performance is not up to expectations, there are too many underperforming students, and classes are difficult to manage. A total of 29.41% of interns thought that “society and parents have too high expectations and demands on teachers,” and 26.47% felt that “communication with parents is not smooth or there is insufficient mutual understanding”. Added to this is the serious problem of left-behind children and a lack of parental care, which can also lead to a great deal of stress for interns.

2.2. The conditions for internships are often harsh, and life is inconvenient

Most education internships at local teaching education institutions are located in county towns or rural areas. Despite improvements in hardware facilities in recent years, there is still a significant gap compared to urban schools. Interns' working conditions are often temporary and relatively rudimentary. Accommodations for interns are also generally poor, with most residing within school premises. In this study, 56% of interns lived in student dormitories and 17.14% lived in classrooms. Some school staff dormitories have been converted from classrooms, and a portion of interns reside in off-campus housing rented by the school. Forty-eight percent of interns thought that

accommodations during the internship were average, 11.76% were dissatisfied, and 10.29% were very dissatisfied. Meal services for interns are also inconvenient, and they usually dine with students. On the weekends when students go home, interns generally have to cook for themselves. In some schools without a canteen, interns consistently have to cook for themselves. The survey data showed that 44.57% of interns thought the meal conditions during the internship were average and the food is monotonous, 18.86% were dissatisfied with the meals, and 9.71% were very dissatisfied.

2.3. Student teachers lack sufficient skills

Although interns have taken some practical teaching courses and undergone pre-job training before the internship, they still feel deficient in various skills during the formal internship. For instance, their classroom management skills are weak, and they lack management experience and ability. The survey showed that 74.51% of interns believe that they lack teaching control and that there are deficiencies in the design, organization, and implementation of teaching activities, which have a negative impact on the quality of teaching. A total of 50.98% of interns are not very confident in their teaching design abilities, 40% think they lack textual analysis skills, 86.27% believe they need to learn and improve their classroom management skills, and 46.86% think their coordination and organization skills are deficient. Regarding classroom management, 52.57% of interns think that student classroom discipline is poor, and 55.43% think students' homework completion and enthusiasm are not high. Too much time is spent on classroom discipline management, which compresses teaching time and leaves little room for expansion in the classroom, causing high teaching pressure.

In terms of interpersonal communication, 47.06% of interns believe that their communication skills are lacking, which results in obstacles in communication with students, colleagues, and parents and causes many difficulties in interpersonal interactions. The survey showed that 80.57% of interns report that the teacher-student relationship is not harmonious and that students do not listen to the teacher. A total of 18.63% of interns indicated conflicts with teachers at the internship school, 28.43% expressed conflicts with the school leaders, 25.49% indicated communication issues with parents, and 22.55% reported conflicts with other interns. Many issues in interpersonal relationships are key factors that make the internship experience unpleasant for interns.

2.4. Low internship satisfaction and low willingness to become rural teachers in the future

“Physical conditions and benefits” are key factors that influence whether interns are willing to return to rural schools to teach. The conditions of most internship schools are relatively poor. In response to the question, “How do you feel about your internship experience?” 49% said “average”, 34.29% were “satisfied” with their experience, 5.88% were “very satisfied”, 12.75% were “dissatisfied”, and 2.29% were “very dissatisfied”. Therefore, less than 40% of interns were satisfied with their internship experience. Regarding the living allowance, 49% of interns thought that the work they put in was not sufficiently rewarded, and 84.15% thought their work during the internship did not reflect the principle of more pay for more work. In response to the question, “Would you would like to return to a rural school to teach in the future?” 34.31% of interns responded “no”. A total of 67.43% of interns said rural schools should “improve conditions and increase wages”.

3. Analysis of the difficulties faced by regional teacher training institutes during internships

3.1. Psychological maladaptation due to the contrast between urban sentiment and rural reality

In recent decades, people's values have generally shown a significant utilitarian tendency. Teacher trainees from cities find it difficult to adapt to rural life; they look down on the working environment in the countryside and are unwilling to take internships or work in rural areas. Most teacher trainees from the countryside, however, have worked hard for over a decade with the hope of escaping the countryside and are reluctant to return. This urban sentiment influences the internship intentions of teacher trainees, most of whom are required to complete their internships in relatively underdeveloped rural schools. This contrast often leads to emotional fluctuations, physical and psychological discomfort, feelings of helplessness, and even potential loss of professional identity, fostering fear about becoming a teacher and even causing teaching students to give up their aspiration to be educators.

3.2. The contrast between high expectations and low remuneration in rural areas leads to a sense of value injustice

Interns are normal university training professional talent, and practice schools for interns generally have high expectations. For field interns, work is arranged according to the standard of formal teachers. Some interns even arrange more work than formal teachers, which increases their temporary work and causes pressure. Furthermore, the treatment of intern teachers is not satisfactory. The subsidy of normal university students in M College is generally 800 yuan per month, and some internship schools cannot pay this on time. Most interns said that the subsidy for the internship was not even enough money for meals, the internship life was poor, and the most basic material life could not be guaranteed. Most of the junior and senior interns in M College had passed the national teacher certification examination. In the city, the same qualification is worth several times the 800 yuan internship subsidy. Even teachers at the same level are paid several times the amount of interns, and interns have low living allowances but carry a similar or higher workload than formal teachers. This distribution of different pay and treatment gaps is distressing to interns and can affect their sense of value and their enthusiasm to serve rural education. Their original feelings about education begin to waver, their attitude toward rural education becomes negative, and the quality of the post-volunteer teaching practice is reduced.

3.3. A lack of educational competence and a gap in professional aspirations leads to a lack of professional confidence

Normal students also take specialized courses, and normal classes are fragmented and separate theory and practice. Students do not know how to combine theory with practice, and 92.13% of students think that practical university professional courses have a small or no effect. There is no connection between theory and practice, and the estimation of normal university students' self-ability is inconsistent with their actual performance. In practice, they find that there is a gap between their education and teaching ability and the practical requirements. Originally thought that college students teaching primary and secondary school students should be a piece of cake, which know the real primary and secondary school students are so difficult to deal with. In addition, there are some special

conditions in rural education compared with urban students, which also increases the difficulty of work, so that there are various thorny problems during the internship, and many problems are simply beyond the ability of the internship. There are many problems that are outside of the ability of field interns, such as a weak learning foundation for students, a large number of left-behind children with learning problems, and a lack of family education. If normal university students have not received guidance and training on rural education problems and practice-related aspects, they will often be at a loss to face specific problems in the actual teaching process. This may weaken their professional confidence and cause a gradual loss of work enthusiasm and confidence[3].

3.4. Lack of effective guidance during the internship

From the perspective of practical guidance, the "double tutorial system" is generally implemented. The schools where interns work arrange professional instructors, including full-time subject instructors and homeroom teacher instructors. The task of guiding educational practice is completed by normal colleges and practice schools. However, according to the results of the survey, interns basically replace original teachers in the internship school and take charge independently with almost no guidance. Instructors in normal colleges are generally responsible for guiding interns in practice. The M College education internship is a joint formation method, and several different majors make up an internship team. Due to professional limitations, it is impossible for a team leader teacher to truly guide the teaching of all the students in the practice base or to provide targeted teaching guidance to students. Furthermore, there is often a long distance to the internship school from the university. It often takes at least half a day for the instructor to go to the practice school, and it takes more than two days for a distant school round trip. This is difficult to achieve for teachers with teaching tasks in universities. Some interns are remotely instructed to prepare lessons through the internet. However, this is more difficult than in-person learning. The instructors sent by normal universities play a role in managing and coordinating the relationship between the interns and the base schools. M College has also implemented the practice of resident teachers guiding interns by having several teachers stay full-time at the practice school. However, due to scattered practice locations, only a handful of teachers can have full-time resident guidance. A few teachers cannot guide hundreds of interns in more than 100 internship schools. In particular, it is nearly impossible for interns located in remote towns and rural practice schools to obtain practical guidance. The reason why the teachers of M College neglect to guide the internship is that the policy stipulates that the internship funds can only be reserved for the interns, and there is no special fund to pay the remuneration for the teacher-guided internship. A teacher who provides guidance for a semester for approximately 20 interns is paid only 500 yuan. Therefore, this pay is mostly symbolic remuneration, and teachers practical guidance is essentially voluntary.

4. Suggestions for improving volunteer teaching practice

4.1. Cultivate the awareness of teaching students serving rural education

As rural education is revitalized and the country invests in its improvement, normal colleges can guide students to attain a positive understanding of rural society and understand those who are engaged in rural education, especially students who grew up in the countryside and return there to teach. With the current employment trends of local normal colleges, most students from the

countryside who have undergraduate diplomas find it difficult to obtain a foothold in the city. The normal students who can be admitted to urban school teachers are very rare, and the ones who can be admitted to graduate school are even more rare. Most rural students find more reliable employment methods or return home to teach at primary and secondary schools. This is not to discriminate against normal university students from rural areas but is a realistic consideration. Moreover, rural normal university students are more familiar with rural students and can contribute to the development of their hometowns and the development of rural education [4].

Normal colleges and universities should remove the previous inertia involved in focusing on excellent students to work in developed places and closely consider the professional characteristics of teachers to provide activities that contribute to their professional development. Colleges should publicize the deeds of excellent rural teachers and create the public opinion that "rural teachers are glorious". College teachers should discuss positive factors of local culture to normal university students, establish the value that "going to college is not a way to escape from the countryside but is a way to build the countryside", and arouse normal university students' appreciation for rural areas and rural education. Activities with the theme of gratitude encourage normal university students to return to and support the countryside.

4.2. Improve the conditions for serving rural education and ensuring the living needs of internship students

To allow interns to willingly contribute to rural education, it is necessary to improve the vocational and living conditions of rural teaching, the basic infrastructure of schools, the accommodations during the internship period, and basic living facilities to ensure the most basic living needs of internship students[5].

4.3. Strengthen the training of teaching skills before the teaching-student internship and strengthen guidance during the internship

According to the survey results, interns suggest that normal colleges should add teaching practice courses, pay attention to the modules of "teacher education theory", "teacher education practice" and "professional core courses", systematically learn theoretical teaching knowledge, and improve and strengthen their basic teaching training skills. Interns can be prepared to adapt to the teaching environment, understand the teaching materials, and adapt to practice more quickly. Before practice, normal university students should learn professional knowledge, consciously observe the practical teaching methods of teachers, connect their theoretical knowledge with actual teaching situations, and improve their teaching ability. They should also increase their teaching practice, enrich their teaching experience, strengthen their class management ability and reduce teaching stress.

The interns expressed the hope that the teachers in charge of the team could implement follow-up internships for students and help the interns solve problems in teaching and life. Effective guidance is important for interns to adapt to internships. This allows them to consciously complete the transformation from students to interns, pay attention to psychological pressure, provide professional and systematic guidance, and solve problems effectively. Practice school teachers should implement on-site guidance or remote guidance, help interns during the internship, guide interns' teaching work, give field interns more teaching perspectives, and help field interns adapt to changes in their identity.

4.4. Improve the construction and management of the internship system and reasonably arrange internship tasks

Without a system, there are no rules, and without rules, things will be in chaos. According to the survey, M College interns completed the education in the internship handbook, but overall, the internship system remains to be perfected. Some interns appear to have problems during their internship because college internship rules are not conveyed to the internship school. Individual interns often work too much and are exhausted. To ensure the orderly progress of educational practice, supportive practice systems should be formulated, supplemented and improved. For example, management rules for educational practice should be formulated, and the specific work of education practice should be quantified. Furthermore, special funds should be established for practical guidance to improve students' work enthusiasm through an educational practice and implementation plan that can stipulate and quantify the specific tasks for interns to complete through unified standards. Practice schools should understand practice standards and prevent leaders or instructors from arranging work for interns during actual operation.

Colleges and universities should conduct consultations with the practice schools in advance, reasonably allocate teaching tasks, and achieve professional matching as much as possible so that interns can obtain teaching skills for their corresponding majors. Colleges and universities should increase their concern for interns, communicate with internship schools, and protect the rights and interests of interns. Teachers who lead these teams should maintain close contact with interns. When interns undertake too much work, they should communicate with the internship school in a timely manner. Interns should also report to the university when they face too much work and seek help. Internship schools should respect interns, arrange their workload reasonably, not treat them as a free labor force, and reflect the distribution mechanism of more work and more gain in terms of labor remuneration.

5. Conclusion

It is inevitable that teaching students from local teacher education institutions will encounter various difficulties in their teaching posts. However, teacher education institutions, internship schools, and governments should pay attention to the voices of internship students. We cannot just ask teacher students to "speak about passion and dedication". Instead, we need to think of practical ways to solve actual problems. This will not only improve the effectiveness of educational internships in local teacher education institutions but also contribute to the revitalization of rural education.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the Educational Reform Project of Zhaoqing University: the phased research results of the teaching reform and practice of "Subject Chinese" (No. zlgc202136) under the background of the national educational examination.

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