Abstract

The massification and marketization of higher education in the early 1990s, in addition to the termination of free teacher education (FTE) in normal universities in 1997, created three major challenges for teacher education in China—low admission rates of prospective students, a loss of identity as teacher education institution, and the beginning of a bottleneck period for development, all of which served to marginalize teacher education in the higher education arena. In addition, education inequality has always been a problem in China. To address these problems the Government decided to re-implement FTE policy in six pilot universities in September 2007. Along with the implementation of this policy, the six pilot universities were required to reform their curricula and set examples for teacher education programs at provincial/regional levels for when this policy was to be implemented nationwide. As required, the six pilot universities reformed their curricula upon re-implementing FTE policy in 2007.

A qualitative case study approach was employed to study teacher education curricula under the FTE initiative. The main aim of this research was to present a picture of teacher education curricula in actuality through looking at the documented and experienced curricula, exploring the views and reasons for the views of major university stakeholders. This included administrators (Vice Director of the Teaching Affair Office and Associate Head of certain departments who were in charge of FTE program), teacher educators and student teachers in FTE program, and novice teachers graduating from FTE program in 2011 and 2012.

Data were collected through documents and archives, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observation and online communications. Documents and archives were obtained through three channels—libraries, websites, and people. Participants in interviews were the above mentioned major university stakeholders. Respondents to the open-ended questionnaires were novice teachers graduating from Y University. Observation was mainly conducted in student teachers’ teaching classrooms and university classrooms, universities campuses, and interview sites. Online communications were instant online talk and email communications. Constant comparative and content analysis methods were utilized to analyze the collected data. Since two cases were explored, cross case analysis was also used.

This study found that FTE in a way helped improve teachers’ quality in western and rural regions in China. Though some were involuntary participants, quite a number of students had been inspired to teach. FTE also helped economically disadvantaged students to receive higher education. However, this policy caused some student teachers to lose motivation to study. Student teachers in the two case study universities experienced three concurrent curricula namely formal curriculum, extracurriculum, and hidden curriculum. More credit hours were allocated to general and pedagogical education. Contents of formal curriculum started to establish the relationship between what was taught in university and in basic education. Extracurriculum and hidden curriculum, which increased in number and variety as a result of re-implementation of
FTE, had an edifying influence on student teachers in terms of their practical skills, choice of future career, beliefs, values, professional ethics, and identity establishment. Problems existed concerning different aspects of teacher education curricula. There was a disconnection between what was taught at university and in basic education classrooms. General and pedagogical education was insufficient. Also clinical experiences were inadequate in terms of their frequency, variety, and duration. These resulted in student teachers lacking opportunities to relate theory to practice. Additionally, there were cooperation problems between university and schools. There were also problems related to the quality of university teachers who taught pedagogy and cooperating teachers who supervised student teachers’ teaching.

This study recommended that autonomy be given to teacher education institutes to set their own curriculum standards for subject matter knowledge and general education. Clinical experiences should be arranged earlier and with greater frequency. Not only should the period of supervised student teaching be lengthened but student teachers should also be given more opportunities to teach in actual classrooms. Continuous academic and financial support to extracurriculum should be provided. To obtain a comprehensive picture on the impact of FTE on a long term, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study on its implementation with the involvement of stakeholders in cooperative schools.
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