

What Makes a Teacher: Insights from the Traditional Secondary Normal School Training System for Contemporary Teacher Education

Ziyu Li

School of Education, Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, Guizhou Province, 550025, China

984109248@qq.com

Abstract. The Secondary Normal School training system (“Zhongshi”) marked a monumental achievement in the history of education in China. At no other time have so many highly intelligent and capable teachers committed themselves to laying a foundation for the country’s future in remote and underdeveloped areas. Although the Secondary Normal School system is now a part of history, its legacy and contributions remain valuable lessons for today. This article identifies challenges currently faced in teacher education and explores the lasting value of the Secondary Normal School tradition. It emphasizes a strong teacher-centered culture, advocates for teachers to lead by example, and underscores the importance of rigorous, effective practical training. Drawing on the Secondary Normal School experience, this paper recommends that contemporary teacher education should prioritize professional modeling, foster collective teacher exemplars, and enhance practicum and hands-on training components.

Keywords: Secondary Normal School Education, Teacher Training

1. Introduction

In the development of teacher education in China, the now historically discontinued “Secondary Normal School” system of the past century represents a significant chapter. In the article *Secondary Normal School Graduates: The Foundation of China’s Rise*, teacher Zhou Bihua states, “They were exceptional, yet they chose a humble and austere path.” The experiences from Secondary Normal School constitute a rich educational heritage that should not be dismissed or isolated from the history of teacher education as we advance towards higher standards in primary school teacher training. In an era marked by a shortage of qualified educators, particularly in rural areas, Secondary Normal School made a profound contribution to China’s educational development. Teachers trained under this system held steadfast in under-resourced regions, dedicating their most formative years to the countryside and making significant contributions to the expansion of elementary education across the nation, especially in rural areas. Even today, Secondary Normal School’s legacy holds valuable lessons for modern teacher education.

2. Analysis of Issues in Current Teacher Education

2.1. The Dilution of Teacher Education Culture

The culture of teacher education emphasizes that teachers should possess both high academic knowledge and moral integrity, with a focus on humanistic care in education and a strong sense of social responsibility. This culture is vital to teacher education institutions, as it embodies their core identity and spirit. A rich and vibrant teacher education culture should naturally be the fundamental pursuit of these institutions. [1] However, there is a noticeable decline in the specific cultural values, ideological beliefs, and professional spirit traditionally embedded in teacher education. On one hand, the curriculum is becoming less aligned with teacher education principles. As higher teacher education becomes more accessible and disciplinary knowledge more specialized, teacher education is increasingly focused on professional and academic specialization. In many institutions primarily devoted to teacher preparation, academic subjects now dominate, causing teaching-focused programs to lose prominence within these schools. Institutional frameworks, activity planning, and cultural development in teacher education colleges also tend to align with the more inclusive model of comprehensive universities. While this trend towards inclusivity may support the creation of a

modernized Chinese higher education system, it carries certain drawbacks. For specialized institutions, particularly those dedicated to teacher education, this shift risks eroding their distinctiveness, making it difficult for student-teachers to identify the unique attributes of their professional studies. Like students in other general universities, they spend considerable time on general courses and examinations in subjects such as politics, Chinese, and English. Moreover, as higher education becomes more widely accessible, the level of training has increased, but teacher quality has not necessarily kept pace. Some experts have warned that teacher education reforms have weakened the teacher training system and reduced the level of teacher professionalism. [2] Additionally, the influence of multiculturalism and diverse social values has led to more varied perspectives among teacher education students, resulting in the marginalization of certain core values traditionally associated with teacher culture. This dilution has ultimately weakened the overall culture of teacher education.

2.2. Professional Disconnection

A teacher-training student's professional identity is rooted in a shared commitment to the teaching profession, a passion for education, and a common responsibility to foster student development. This enhances students' personal sense of professional identity and belonging. Wang Jingjing and other researchers conducted a survey on professional identity among teacher-training students [3], finding that most students have a vague understanding of their roles and lack strong commitment, showing an attitude of "indifference." A prevalent trend among teacher-training students is a weakened enthusiasm, identification, commitment, and sense of value toward future teaching careers. With the openness and non-traditional models in teacher education, students' understanding of their "teacher" identity lacks depth, and there is often a gap between initial career expectations and reality. This gap can create psychological disillusionment, especially for students receiving government-funded teacher education who initially enter with idealized notions of teaching but are often assigned to underdeveloped regions after graduation. When faced with these challenges, teacher-training institutions have generally neglected to nurture students' professional commitment, failing to timely optimize curriculum, provide career planning, and guidance to help establish reasonable expectations. Current programs also lack case-based teaching, role modeling, and other approaches to cultivate teacher-training students' professional ethics and social responsibility, which has led to a divergence in professional commitment.

3. Analysis of the Traditional Values in Secondary Normal School Education

3.1. A Strong Culture of Exemplary Standards

The distinct characteristic of teacher education, known as "teacher professionalism," sets it apart from other forms of education. This uniqueness is expressed through educational activities that foster a professional mindset and vocational ethics, manifesting in what is known as teacher education culture. Secondary normal schools were once specialized institutions established to train primary and kindergarten teachers, primarily targeting the rural and remote regions to supply a significant number of qualified educators. With the singular aim of cultivating future qualified teachers, these schools followed specific training goals, a simplified academic structure, and a focused curriculum. Thus, within teacher education and in school environments, an omnipresent emphasis is placed on cultivating cultural elements that represent the core values, conduct standards, and ways of thinking essential to the teaching profession and educational mission. Historical photographs from numerous county records and school archives reveal that the motto "Scholarly to Teach, Upright to Model" served as a defining slogan for secondary normal schools. Many teacher training institutions adopted these eight characters as their motto, carving them at school entrances, inscribing them on administrative buildings, and deeply embedding this solemn professional declaration into the hearts of every student-teacher and faculty member. Various teacher training schools also reinforced professional values through school songs and mottos, subtly nurturing students' professional mindsets. For instance, Zaozhuang Normal College's school song includes the line, "Diligent study, rigorous practice, commitment to truth and creativity, dedicating ourselves to education is our aspiration!" Additionally, the design and structure of teacher training curricula at secondary normal schools were imbued with professional ethics and philosophical teachings, instilling the ideal of becoming "an honorable, outstanding, and respected primary school teacher" [4] into every student's heart. The firm institutional objectives and the rich cultural elements of teacher professionalism, expressed both overtly and subtly, profoundly influenced the teacher education students of the time. This vibrant culture transformed into the professional dedication and moral character of teacher education students.

3.2. Advocating for Teachers to Model "Exemplary Conduct"

"A teacher embodies a model," signifying that teachers should be role models for their students. A teacher's behavior, attitude, knowledge, and outlook on life deeply influence students, making an excellent teacher one who inspires admiration and serves as a guide in their learning and growth. The tradition of "Scholarly to Teach, Upright to Model" in secondary normal schools was a principle expected not only of students but also of teachers, emphasizing that teachers should set an example. This principle of exemplary conduct formed the foundation of value transmission in normal education and was a key goal in teacher management within secondary normal schools. During this period, teachers adhered strictly to the standards of "Scholarly to Teach, Upright to

Model,” excelling in aspects of professional conduct, including oral composition, mental arithmetic, and “three types of writing and one drawing, one language” (chalk writing, pen writing, calligraphy, simple drawing, and Mandarin), as well as in professional skills competitions such as public speaking, lesson planning, and teaching techniques. Teachers served as role models in these areas, exemplifying the standards for students. Teachers’ inherent sense of professional identity, moral character, and self-discipline further reinforced students’ capabilities and professional ethics, effectively continuing the tradition and culture of normal education.

3.3. Emphasis on Rigorous and Effective Educational Practice

The teaching practice for student-teachers is a critical component in education, serving as a bridge between educational theory and actual classroom teaching. Its aim is to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical teaching skills, enabling students to gain hands-on experience in real educational settings and laying a solid foundation for their future roles as qualified teachers. In secondary normal schools, teacher education particularly emphasized teaching practice, incorporating activities throughout the program, such as visits to primary schools, educational surveys, teaching observations, and teaching internships [5]. These experiences allowed students to become familiar with the tasks and requirements of primary school education and to understand the physical and psychological development characteristics of young students. The teaching observation stage followed a progressively structured set of objectives, while the teaching internship was supervised by homeroom teachers and mentors who evaluated student-teachers’ performance across multiple aspects, including lesson planning, teaching effectiveness, Young Pioneers’ activities, and class management. Additionally, most secondary normal school graduates would return to their hometowns to teach, with schools typically situated in county-level towns. Consequently, these student-teachers completed teaching internships in both urban and rural primary schools, gaining exposure to advanced teaching methods and management approaches in urban schools. They could then apply these practices when interning at rural schools, bringing new insights to rural education and strengthening their sense of local identity. This experience fostered a commitment to developing rural education [6], embedding a deep dedication to educational equity and a profound care for rural children. This approach was a key strategy of secondary normal schools in training and providing primary school teachers for rural areas.

4. Insights from Traditional Secondary Normal Education on Teacher Training

4.1. Emphasizing the Distinct Nature of Teacher Education

The unique nature of teacher education distinguishes it from other forms of higher education, emphasizing the professionalism and educational role of future teachers. This approach ensures that graduates possess the necessary professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required for teaching, which are essential for enhancing the quality of education. At its core is the motto “Scholarly to Teach, Upright to Model.” Drawing on the historical experience of secondary normal education, teacher training institutions must prioritize the “teacher education” ethos, making “training qualified teachers” a primary institutional and training goal. Based on this foundation, institutions should also adapt to the requirements of China’s new curriculum reforms in basic education, expanding coursework in education-related subjects like pedagogy and psychology that directly respond to school needs. Emphasis should be placed on teaching methods across various disciplines to enhance teacher candidates’ abilities in instructional design, implementation, evaluation, and research. This includes curriculum development, classroom management, and student psychological counseling, ensuring that modern teacher candidates can meet contemporary educational demands and become effective educators.

4.2. Leveraging the Collective Role-Model Effect of Faculty

The exemplary role of the teaching faculty extends beyond knowledge transfer; it encompasses character building, skill development, and guiding teacher candidates’ perspectives on life and values, profoundly influencing their holistic development. Firstly, in terms of academic leadership, the faculty collectively sets a professional example that not only involves imparting knowledge and skills but also demonstrates approaches to exploring knowledge and solving problems. Through academic exchanges and research collaboration with faculty, teacher candidates are inspired to pursue self-directed inquiry into educational theory and practice, enhancing both their theoretical understanding and practical skills. Secondly, in terms of value orientation, when teachers lead by example and embody core values such as integrity, fairness, and compassion, these values are subtly absorbed and internalized by teacher candidates, fostering their character and sense of social responsibility. Publicly funded teacher candidates, in particular, benefit from such positive value guidance. Finally, in career planning and development, faculty members with diverse backgrounds and expertise provide teacher candidates with varied perspectives and career advice. Through sharing personal experiences and career paths, faculty guide teacher candidates in understanding their social responsibilities and historical mission as future teachers, solidifying their professional commitment and nurturing a profound passion for the teaching profession, which will serve as a foundation for their future careers.

4.3. Enhancing Practical Teaching Experience

Current measures in practice-based teaching at higher teacher training institutions differ significantly from the effectiveness of internships in secondary normal education, highlighting the need to draw from secondary normal education's experiences to improve and strengthen the practical internship phase. This will help teacher candidates convert theoretical knowledge into practical abilities, enhance teaching skills, and foster a deep-rooted passion for education. First, the objectives and standards for teaching internships must be clarified, establishing clear, specific, and measurable goals and evaluation criteria to ensure that teacher candidates understand the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required during internships, including lesson planning, classroom management, student assessment, and communication and collaboration. Next, regular feedback mechanisms such as internship reports, reflection journals, observation sessions, and lesson evaluations should be established to ensure consistent supervision and guidance throughout the internship. Through periodic meetings and one-on-one mentoring, issues faced by interns can be promptly addressed, fostering continuous improvement. Finally, in career planning guidance, career counseling and employment services should help teacher candidates better understand the current state of the education field and clarify their own career positioning and goals, whether as frontline teachers, subject leaders, school principals, educational administrators, or even education entrepreneurs. They should also consider certifications such as teacher qualification exams, as well as other relevant certificates like those for psychological counseling or educational administration, as stipulated by national and regional regulations, to increase their employability. This support helps teacher candidates plan their career paths more systematically, preparing them for a smooth transition to teaching positions and for excelling as outstanding educators.

5. Conclusion

With the reform of China's educational system and the widespread expansion of higher education, secondary normal schools have faded from history, succeeded by higher teacher training institutions in cultivating educational talent. Although teacher education has entered a new phase, the valuable experiences left by secondary normal education are worth further exploration, adaptation, and integration to continuously improve teacher training and cultivate a more outstanding teaching workforce.

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