

Research on the Impact of the "County-Managed School-Hired" Policy on the Construction of Rural Teacher Teams

Hua Yanjiao¹, Hua Yanling², Zhu Lin³, Yu Hangjue⁴, Li Lijiao⁵

¹College of Education Science, Zhaotong University, Zhaotong, 657000, Yunnan, China

²Yunnan Experimental Middle School of Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, 650031, Yunnan, China

³College of Education Science, Zhaotong University, Zhaotong, 657000, Yunnan, China

⁴School of Art, Zhaotong University, Zhaotong, 657000, Yunnan, China

⁵School of Marxism, Zhaotong University, Zhaotong, 657000, Yunnan, China

Abstract: Educational equity is the foundation of social equity. Ensuring the balanced distribution of educational resources is the primary prerequisite for achieving educational justice. This study, based on the full implementation of the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy, selected two mountainous schools and one urban school in the southwest region for case studies. The research mainly focused on interviews with teachers to understand the real situation and practical difficulties of teachers in terms of policy understanding, policy implementation, and teacher mobility under the guidance of the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy. The main problems identified are as follows: from the perspective of teachers, personal interests are damaged, there is resistance to mandatory exchanges, and a sense of belonging is reduced due to "no school affiliation" management; from the perspective of schools, the management boundaries between schools and education departments are blurred, the "school-hiring" authority is limited, authority declines, and there is a risk of power abuse; from the perspective of the government, there is a conflict between power delegation and supervision, and there is a lack of dedicated funds for support.

Keywords: County-managed School-hired; teaching staff; influence

1. Problem Presentation

Since the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy was jointly proposed by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security in 2014, it has been regarded as a significant measure to deepen the reform of the management system for primary and secondary school teachers and optimize the allocation of teacher resources. The core of this policy lies in the centralized management of the personnel affairs of primary and secondary school teachers by county-level government departments, with each school making appointments based on teaching needs and the number of positions in accordance with procedures, to promote balanced development of compulsory education within the county. However, during its implementation, especially in terms of its impact on the construction of rural teacher teams, this policy has encountered a series of complex backgrounds and problems.

1.1 With the acceleration of urbanization, problems with the rural teacher workforce have become more prominent

Firstly, with the acceleration of urbanization, a large number of rural residents have flocked to cities, resulting in a decline in student enrollment in rural schools and a hollowing out of the teaching staff. Outstanding teachers have been drawn to cities in droves, leading to a severe loss of talent in rural teaching teams and a wide disparity in their quality. Many rural teachers have relatively low educational qualifications, professional expertise, and teaching abilities, making it difficult for them to meet the demands of modern educational development. ^[1]At the same time, rural teachers have limited training opportunities and their professional competence improves slowly, which makes it hard to guarantee the quality of education and teaching.

1.2 The remuneration and career development space for rural teachers are relatively limited

Compared with urban teachers, rural teachers generally have lower salaries and benefits, which are less attractive. In addition, rural teachers have relatively fewer opportunities for professional title evaluation and promotion. Many teachers remain stagnant for a long time and lack the motivation to develop. These factors seriously restrict the stability and development of the rural teacher workforce.

1.3 The construction of the rural teacher team urgently needs policy support

The implementation of the "county-managed, school-hired" policy aims to break down the barriers of uneven distribution of teachers between urban and rural areas and among schools, promoting the rational flow and balanced allocation of teacher resources. However, in practice, this policy may further exacerbate the problems in the rural teacher workforce. On the one hand, outstanding teachers may be more inclined to move to cities or better-conditioned schools, making it difficult for rural schools to hire excellent teachers.^[2] On the other hand, due to the relatively poor conditions of rural schools, teachers may be at a disadvantage in the competition for positions, further intensifying the instability of the rural teacher workforce.

2. Opportunities and Challenges of the "County-Managed School-Hired" Policy for the Construction of Rural Teacher Teams

2.1 The Positive Impact of the "County-Managed School-Hired" Policy on the Construction of Rural Teacher Teams

2.1.1 Optimize the allocation of teaching staff

The "County-Managed School-Hired" policy, through the unified management of the county-level government, has achieved an optimized allocation of teacher resources and had a significant impact on the construction of the rural teacher team. This policy has broken the previous relatively fixed situation of teacher resources, enabling a more reasonable flow and distribution of teacher resources within the county.

After the implementation of the policy, rural schools have been able to attract and retain more outstanding teachers. These teachers not only bring advanced teaching concepts and methods but also significantly improve the educational quality of rural schools through their teaching experience and professional knowledge. This optimized allocation of teaching staff enables rural students to receive higher-quality education, helping to narrow the educational gap between urban and rural areas.

2.1.2 Improve the quality of teachers

The "County-Managed School-Hired" policy, through mechanisms such as regular job rotation and exchange, provides rural teachers with opportunities to interact and learn from their urban counterparts, thereby contributing to the improvement of their teaching and educational standards.

On one hand, rural teachers can gain insights into and learn from the teaching philosophies and methods of urban schools through job rotation and exchange, broadening their educational horizons and enhancing their professional qualities. This cross-regional and cross-school interaction and learning helps rural teachers update their educational concepts, improve their teaching methods, and enhance their teaching effectiveness.

On the other hand, the implementation of this policy also prompts rural teachers to pay more attention to their own professional development. To meet the challenges of job rotation and competitive hiring, rural teachers need to continuously improve their teaching and educational capabilities as well as their overall qualities. Therefore, they are more actively involved in various training and learning activities to increase their competitiveness.

2.1.3 Enhance teachers' sense of belonging

Although the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy has broken the school affiliation of teachers, it has enhanced their sense of belonging within the entire county by establishing a teacher mobility mechanism within the county.^[3] Firstly, the implementation of the policy has enabled teachers to no longer be confined to a single school but to become part of the entire county's education system. This change helps to enhance teachers' professional identity and work enthusiasm. They are no longer

merely serving a single school but contributing to the education of the entire county. This enhanced sense of belonging helps to stimulate teachers' work enthusiasm and creativity.

Secondly, the implementation of the policy has also promoted communication and cooperation among teachers within the county. Through regular job rotation exchanges, teaching discussions, and other activities, teachers can learn from each other, draw on each other's experiences, and support each other, jointly promoting the development of education in the county. This communication and cooperation not only helps to improve teachers' teaching and educational levels but also enhances their cohesion and centripetal force.

2.2 Problems and Challenges of the "County-Managed School-Hired" Policy for the Construction of Rural Teacher Teams

2.2.1 Teachers have a weak willingness to move

During the implementation of the "county-managed, school-hired" policy, a notable challenge is the weak willingness of teachers to move. Some rural teachers are resistant to job rotation and exchange due to family and life reasons. They may be concerned that such exchanges could have adverse effects on their family life, such as their children's education and the care of elderly relatives. Additionally, rural teachers have been working in fixed schools for a long time and have formed relatively stable working and living environments. A sudden change in this environment would make them feel uneasy and uncomfortable.

At the same time, outstanding teachers in urban schools are also reluctant to take up positions in rural schools. This is mainly because the educational conditions and working environments in rural schools are relatively poor, with incomplete living facilities, inconvenient transportation, and students with relatively weak basic knowledge and learning abilities, making teaching more difficult. These factors all contribute to the lack of willingness among urban teachers to take up positions in rural areas.

Although the policy encourages the establishment of a diversified evaluation system, in practice, some regions may still tend to rely on quantitative indicators, especially teaching performance and research achievements. This one-sided assessment standard may lead teachers to focus more on examination results in the teaching process, while neglecting the all-round development and individualized needs of students. Teachers might sacrifice the creativity and flexibility of teaching in pursuit of these indicators, even tending towards "exam-oriented teaching", and avoid trying innovative teaching methods, ignoring the individualized development of students. In the long run, this is not conducive to the improvement of educational quality.

2.2.2 The assessment and incentive mechanisms are not well established

During the implementation of the "county-managed, school-hired" policy, the imperfection of the assessment and incentive mechanisms is also a significant issue. In some areas, the assessment criteria are not clear or transparent, leading to the fact that whether a teacher is hired or not and how well they perform is mainly decided by the principal. This can easily result in unfairness. Some teachers may receive better evaluations and hiring opportunities simply because they have a good relationship with the principal, while truly outstanding teachers may lose out due to a poor relationship with the principal.

Furthermore, the lack of an incentive mechanism also makes some teachers lack enthusiasm for job rotation and exchange. ^[4]During the job rotation and exchange period, teachers' salary and benefits, as well as their professional title evaluation, may be affected, causing them to be reluctant to participate in such exchanges. To address this problem, it is necessary to establish a scientific, fair, and transparent assessment system to ensure that teachers' hiring and promotion are based on their teaching and educational abilities and work performance. At the same time, it is also necessary to improve the incentive mechanism, such as providing policy preferences in professional title evaluation and job promotion, to stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for job rotation and exchange. Additionally, measures like establishing a teacher honor system and conducting outstanding teacher selection can also enhance teachers' sense of professional honor and belonging.

2.2.3 Uneven distribution of educational resources

Although the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy aims to promote the balanced distribution of educational resources, in practice, there is still a certain degree of imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas. This is mainly due to the relatively poor school

conditions and infrastructure in rural areas, which cannot meet the demands of modern education. At the same time, due to the remote location and inconvenient transportation of rural schools, it is difficult for some excellent educational resources and talents to flow to rural areas. This imbalance in the distribution of educational resources has an adverse impact on the construction of the rural teacher team. On the one hand, rural schools face difficulties in attracting and retaining outstanding teachers; on the other hand, the teaching level and professional quality of rural teachers are also difficult to improve effectively.

2.3 The Impact of "County Management and School Hiring" on Teachers' Professional Development

This policy has not only had a profound impact on teachers' professional title evaluation, job promotion and professional development opportunities, but also demonstrated a positive role in promoting teachers' career growth. However, it also faces some challenges, which are mainly reflected in the following aspects.

2.3.1 The influence of professional title evaluation

Title evaluation is a crucial part of a teacher's career development, directly affecting their salary and professional honor. After the implementation of the "County Management and School Hiring" policy, the standards and procedures for title evaluation may change: Standard transparency: The policy requires each county to evaluate teachers based on multiple dimensions such as teaching effectiveness, research capabilities, and moral conduct, enhancing the transparency and fairness of the evaluation, which helps teachers obtain titles in a fair competitive environment. Incentive mechanism: By establishing a performance assessment mechanism, outstanding teachers can achieve better evaluation results. This incentive mechanism helps teachers improve their professional level and gain an advantage in title evaluation. Diversification of the evaluation system: The policy encourages both internal and external participation in the evaluation, promoting cooperation between schools and county-level education administrative departments, which helps to form a comprehensive and scientific evaluation system. However, some issues in the title evaluation process still need attention. For example, over-reliance on quantitative indicators may lead teachers to neglect the humanistic care and educational quality in the teaching process.

2.3.2 The Impact of Job Promotion

Career promotion is another important aspect of teachers' professional development. Through the "County Management and School Hiring" policy, the mechanism for teachers' career promotion has undergone certain changes: Unobstructed promotion channels: The policy allows teachers to move between different schools, expanding the space for career development choices. Teachers can enhance their professional qualities through exchanges and cooperation, thereby obtaining more promotion opportunities. Talent introduction and cultivation: County-level education departments can rationally allocate outstanding teachers based on the needs of schools, promoting the flow and cultivation of outstanding talents and improving the overall educational level. Career planning: Teachers can plan their careers more clearly during the promotion process. The diverse development paths provided by the policy enable teachers to choose suitable development directions based on their own strengths and interests. However, career promotion also faces some challenges, such as the uneven distribution of resources among regions, which may prevent some outstanding teachers from obtaining the development opportunities they deserve.

2.3.3 The Impact of Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development opportunities are an important way for teachers to enhance their own capabilities. The "County Management and School Hiring" policy has also brought positive changes in this regard: Integration of training resources: The policy encourages county-level education departments to integrate training resources and provide teachers with rich professional development opportunities, including continuing education, seminars, etc., to promote teachers' professional growth. Facilitation of cross-school exchanges: Through inter-school exchanges and cooperation, teachers can draw on the successful experiences of other schools, broaden their horizons, and improve their teaching levels. Research projects and practical activities: The policy encourages teachers to participate in research projects and teaching practice activities, enhancing their practical and research capabilities, and thereby improving their professional qualities.

3. Case Analysis of the Construction of Rural Teacher Teams under the Implementation of the "County-Managed School-Hired" Policy

Under the background of the "county-managed and school-hired" policy, although many teachers have gained opportunities in their career development, some have faced significant challenges and even experienced negative impacts on their career advancement. The following will analyze several typical negative cases to explore the reasons behind these problems and their influence on teachers' career development.

3.1 Case Presentation: Li Teacher's Professional Dilemma

Mr. Li is a junior high school ideological and political teacher with 24 years of rich teaching experience. He once taught at the county's top-performing school. However, 10 years ago, the merger of his school with another one led to a sharp decline in teaching quality, making it a topic of widespread discussion in the community.

Mr. Li graduated from xx Normal University and pursued a correspondence course in computer science. Even before multimedia was widely used, he was already employing modern teaching methods such as projectors and PPTs to enrich his classes. He has always adhered to the heuristic teaching approach, encouraging students to actively participate and become the main subjects of their learning. Before the merger, he had won several teaching awards and was recognized as a backbone teacher by the county's education and sports bureau. After the merger, with the reform of the ideological and political subject's scoring policy in the high school entrance examination, he had more time and energy to implement quality-oriented education and carried out a series of teaching activities that were deeply loved by students. However, when the score of the ideological and political subject in the high school entrance examination increased, because Mr. Li insisted on having students actively participate in learning and abandoned the rote learning method, the improvement of students' scores was not as fast as those teachers who focused on highlighting and memorizing key points. As a result, Mr. Li was sent to a mountainous area for an exchange and rotation, a decision made by the school under the "county-managed, school-hired" policy.

Although Mr. Li felt helpless about this, he also saw new teaching challenges and opportunities. The teaching environment in the mountainous area is special, with students having a strong aversion to learning, and there is a phenomenon of "intra-professional competition" among teachers. Young teachers constantly compete to improve their teaching performance in order to be transferred to urban schools, putting students under great pressure.

Mr. Li believes that education is a special profession that requires teachers to possess multiple abilities and invest a lot of energy. Therefore, he suggests that the school should reasonably arrange teachers' work and give young teachers more teaching freedom and time flexibility so that they can better balance work and life. At the same time, Mr. Li will continue to explore teaching methods suitable for students in the mountainous area during his teaching assignment, pay attention to students' behavioral changes and moral cultivation, and strive to create a more positive and healthy learning environment for them.

3.2 The predicament of teachers' recognition and support for policies in the case

As the core group in the implementation of the "County Management and School Hiring" policy, teachers' support and recognition of this policy are the cornerstone for ensuring its smooth and effective advancement. However, in practice, teachers' acceptance of this policy faces numerous challenges, especially the resistance caused by the compulsory exchange measures, which has become a major obstacle. Through case studies, it can be seen that some schools, in order to meet the targets, have ignored teachers' right to choose and failed to fully consider their personal wishes, turning the exchanges under the "County Management and School Hiring" policy into compulsory ones. This approach not only goes against the original intention of the policy but also dampens teachers' enthusiasm.

Looking back at the development of China's compulsory education teacher mobility policies, it is clear that the state's approach to promoting teacher mobility is gradually shifting from "encouragement and guidance" to "compulsory exchange". Against this backdrop, apart from a few teachers who voluntarily apply for exchanges for the purpose of professional title evaluation, the majority of teachers are forced to participate in exchanges upon reaching the stipulated years. Some schools, in order to

fulfill their targets, even resort to methods such as heart-to-heart talks and ideological work to persuade or entice teachers to participate in exchanges. In some extreme cases, exchanges are used as a means to deal with troublesome teachers, directly designating those who are difficult to manage and meet the conditions as candidates for cross-school exchanges. Such practices seriously infringe upon teachers' rights and interests and also go against the original intention of the "County Management and School Hiring" policy to promote balanced educational development.

3.3 Definition of teachers' management rights and responsibilities: ambiguity between schools and education departments

In practice, the demarcation between "management rights" and "usage rights" is not as clear-cut as in theory. This leads to frequent ambiguity in the distribution of responsibilities between the education department and schools in the daily management of teachers, which in turn affects the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation. Schools have limited participation in the policy-making and promulgation stages, resulting in numerous "blind spots" in the formulation of detailed rules for the "county-managed, school-hired" system, the setting of teaching positions, and the planning of training programs. These blind spots not only increase the difficulty for schools in implementing policies and conducting management but also undermine the policy's pertinence and effectiveness.

3.4 Challenges in Teaching Management: Coexistence of Weakened Authority and the Risk of Power Abuse

Firstly, schools are confronted with the challenge of a decline in their authority over teacher management. With the implementation of the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy, teachers' personnel relations have shifted from school management to the entire education system, making teachers part of the system. This change means that teachers' competitive recruitment cycles are typically three years, during which they may teach in different schools or even different districts. As a result, schools' management methods over teachers in teaching management have become limited, and they are concerned about the occurrence of unmanageable teacher behaviors.

Secondly, there is a potential risk of power abuse in the teaching management process. On the one hand, high-quality schools often, out of self-interest, hold a certain degree of resistance to the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy. These schools are worried that the exchange and rotation of high-quality backbone teachers will affect the school's teaching quality and reputation, and thus avoid the outflow of such teachers. When selecting teachers for exchange, high-quality schools may prefer to send teachers with average teaching abilities to maintain their teaching quality advantage.

On the other hand, while rural schools welcome the inflow of excellent teachers from urban schools, they also face management challenges. Although the arrival of high-quality teachers can help improve teaching quality, schools are also concerned that these teachers may encounter problems in adapting to the new environment and establishing new relationships. Once these problems and conflicts arise, they will first be reflected to school administrators, increasing the management pressure on schools. At the same time, in the process of strengthening teaching management, school administrators may also face the risk of abusing power and overstepping their authority, which requires careful handling.

4. Research Countermeasures

4.1 Strengthen multi-channel and multi-form policy publicity and guidance strategies

The successful implementation of the new personnel policy system largely depends on the support and recognition of the policy's target group. As the direct implementers and the most affected group of the "County Management and School Hiring" policy, teachers' depth of understanding and acceptance of the policy are of crucial importance. Although the "County Management and School Hiring" policy has been piloted in many places across the country for several years, it remains a relatively new concept for many teachers. Therefore, strengthening publicity and guidance is particularly important before its full-scale promotion.^[5]

To promote the "County Management and School Hiring" policy and facilitate the mobility of primary and secondary school teachers, we must devote more efforts to publicity and guidance. Traditional methods such as document distribution and meeting communication are no longer sufficient. According to the results of questionnaires and interviews, although X County has implemented the

"County Management and School Hiring" policy for many years, the publicity and promotion work still needs to be strengthened. Some teachers have reported that in some schools, the policy was merely conveyed through simple meetings, resulting in insufficient understanding of the competitive hiring process and related requirements among teachers, who were then rushed into their positions.

4.2 Establish a reasonable and humanized teacher exchange mechanism

Under the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy, factors such as a teacher's age, professional title, and family situation can all influence their willingness to participate in exchanges. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all administrative forced exchange approach may dampen teachers' enthusiasm and even cause resentment, thus deviating from the original intention of balanced educational development. To this end, the promotion of "County-Managed School-Hired" teacher exchange and rotation should adhere to the principle of "people-oriented", avoiding simplistic and brutal methods.

We should humanely design the teacher exchange methods, scientifically set up exchange positions, and clearly define the exchange targets. On the basis of combining incentive guidance with administrative arrangements, supplemented by policy guarantees, we should achieve a balance of rigidity and flexibility to stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for voluntarily participating in rotation exchanges.

4.3 Deepen Humanistic Care for Exchange Teachers

The purpose of the "County-Managed School-Hired" policy is to promote teacher mobility, break the "iron rice bowl" mentality, and invigorate teachers, rather than depriving them of job opportunities or causing unrest. ^[6]However, the dependence and sense of belonging that teachers have developed in their original schools are difficult to quickly establish in new schools, leading to adaptation difficulties.

Therefore, for teachers participating in exchanges, especially those who are transferred between schools, we should not only pay attention to their material interests but also attach great importance to spiritual care and motivation. The exchange schools should do a good job in the connection of teachers' inflow and outflow, helping them get familiar with the new environment and culture, and enhancing their sense of identity with the new school. At the same time, through regular heart-to-heart talks, we should care about their ideological trends as we do for our own teachers and provide them with reasonable and empathetic psychological support.

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