

An Investigation of the Training Needs of Teachers in Ethnic Minority-Inhabited Regions: A Case Study of Sichuan Province

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Abstract

For the purpose of augmenting the pertinence and effectiveness of the teacher-training programs in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions, this investigation explores and analyzes the training conducted in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions in Sichuan Province based on fieldwork and data analysis. It is exposed that such problems obtain in the teacher-training programs in these areas as the inappropriate scheduling of training, lack of a scientific training system and fruitlessness of training, etc.. Several adjustments are proposed to meet the concrete needs of teachers, including rescheduling the training, establishing a new mode conducive to teacher-training in such areas, increasing the relevancy and practicability of training content and enhancing the overall quality of the training team so as to provide a training of a higher quality in the ethnic minority-inhabited areas.

Key words: Ethnic minority-inhabited regions; Teacher training programs; Effective teacher training mode; Training needs

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INTRODUCTION

As an effective means to enhance the teaching quality, teacher training, which is based on and aims to satisfy education-related workers' demand for such training, is a vital element in education. Consequently, a beneficial teacher training is of insurmountable importance. With education-related workers in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions in Sichuan Province as the subject of investigation, this paper, by means of interviewing and questionnaires, attempts to promote the pertinence and effectiveness of teacher training in ethnic minority-inhabited regions to a further extent. The paper explores teachers' needs of such training from an empirical angle in the hope of offering some references to anyone concerned.

1. A PANORAMA OF THE FIELDWORK CONDUCTED

1.1 Time and Subject

The fieldwork was conducted from September 4th, 2013 to October 31st, 2013; the major places where fieldwork was done include Wenchuan county in Ngava Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Xichang county in Liangshan Prefecture, Puge county, Yuexi county, Huili county, Xingwen county of Yibing city, Xichang city.

1.2 Methodology

Fieldwork is adopted as the chief method in conjunction with questionnaires, interviewing and class observation to collect data. The classes in the center for research and teacher training were attended in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions in Sichuan Province; talks on the needs of teacher training in ethnic minority-inhabited regions were exchanged with approximately 80 education-related workers including leaders from relevant departments and teaching practitioners; some were interviewed

on an individual basis in the form of semi-structural questionnaires. The questionnaire as to the needs of authorized teachers was designed on the basis of the abovementioned fieldwork, talks and individual interviews in combination with relevant documents. 800 copies of questionnaire were issued randomly and 800 copies were collected back, resulting in a collection rate of 100%. Among them, 795 copies were valid, thus a valid collection rate of 99.38%.

2. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

By means of fieldwork, interviewing and an analysis of questionnaires, some basic statistics are contrived as follows:

2.1 An Analysis of Degree of Satisfaction With the Scheduling of Training

According to the analysis of the survey, 84.62% teachers would like the training course to take place within their normal work time (see Table 1) since they, in this manner, can not only enjoy their rest hours without any interruption, but have an in-person observation of and participate in classes conducted in schools with a high-quality education. On the other hand, only 15.38% teachers prefer to attend training courses organized in summer and winter vacations. It is disclosed from the interviews that leaders in many schools of unsystematically commission teachers to attend training courses just to fulfill the task dictated by departments at a higher level. School leaders would rather have the teacher training arranged in summer and winter vacations so that the normal teaching progression would not be disturbed.

Table 1
Teachers' Demand of the Scheduling of Training

Scheduling of training	In summer and winter vacations	Within normal work time
Proportion (%)	15.38	84.62

2.2 An Analysis of the Appropriate Duration of Intense Training

As displayed in Table 2, the majority of the teachers, accounting for 70.73%, who attend training courses, regard a time length from one to two weeks per time as suitable for the training. As articulated in the interviews, they opine that too short a training course cannot afford them sufficient time to learn professional knowledge or relevant teaching skills, but too long a training would inevitably disturb their normal work and occupy too much of the time they otherwise could dispose of at their own liberty. Such an occupation of their time is not feasible since they are both pillars of the schools and have an integral role to play in their own families.

Table 2
Their Opinion on Appropriate Duration of Intense Training Per Time

	Percentage
Less than one week	9.76
One week to two weeks	70.73
Three weeks to one month	9.76
More than one month	9.76

2.3 An Analysis of Problems Obtaining in Training

As manifested in Table 3, there is, presently, a relatively huge gap between the factual teacher training and practitioners' teaching needs and their expectations in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions. Such an inconsistency is a combined consequence of lack of pertinence of training, monotonousness of training content and form, inappropriate scheduling, unsystematic planning of training, and, most importantly, insufficiency of human and financial investment in the teacher training in such regions. When it comes to the effect of the current teacher training specified by the administrative department of education, 69.05% teachers rate it as "far from satisfactory and too formalistic" (see Table 4).

Table 3
Prominent Problems Obtaining in Teacher Training, Teaching and Researching

Problem	Percentage
Lack of follow-up assessment and instruction in the training, teaching and researching	27.08
Desirable effect unachieved for time insufficiency of training	22.92
Poor qualities of trainers and researchers themselves	2.8
Lack of communication between researchers and teaching practitioners	22.92
Lack of pertinence in terms of training content	22.92

Table 4
Teachers' Rating of the Effect of Training

Item rated	Percentage
Far from satisfactory and too formalistic	69.5
Conducive to teachers' professional development	11.9
Attentive to teachers' professional development and occupational training	11.9
Inattentive to teachers' professional development and occupational training	7.14

2.4 An Analysis of Teachers' Desired Training Content

As indicated in Table 5, teachers in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions look upon the pedagogical skills as the primary desired training content (accounting for 37.35%), and the professional disciplinary content as secondary (accounting for 32.53%); besides, training concerning psychology and educational management are also desired

(respectively accounting for 18.07% and 12.05%). The training content preferred by the majority of the investigated teachers mainly falls into the two categories of “pedagogical skills” and “disciplinary substance”, accounting for 69.8% in total. Based on questionnaires in combination with the interviews, it is clearly shown

that teachers are most desirous of and interested in “pedagogical skills”. As this analysis reveals, what teachers are in real need of is not the training of common educational and pedagogical skills but the new-style pedagogical skills commensurate with and illustrative of the requirements of the new curricula.

Table 5
Most Desired Training Content

Training content	Pedagogical skills	Disciplinary substance	Psychology	Educational management
Percentage	37.35	32.53	18.07	12.05

2.5 Teachers’ Requirement About the Training Method

As discovered by means of the analysis (see Table 6), teachers strongly prefer the training method which shares the characteristics manifested in the adults’ in-service training where subject’s observation and expression are highlighted. Consequently, “Pedagogical practice and observation” and “Attending demonstrative lessons by excellent teachers” are in a predominant position among their preferred choices (respectively accounting for 32.65% and 31.63%). Additionally, 13.27% teachers make the choice of “Seminar teaching” through which they hope to achieve an equal participation in the training, a mutual communication between each other and opportunities to express their own opinions and understandings.

Table 6
Teachers’ Expectation of Different Training Methods

Training method	Percentage
Pedagogical practice and observation	32.65
Attending demonstrative lessons by excellent teachers	31.63
Seminar teaching	13.27
Seminar Activities	9.18
Topic teaching and researching under supervisors’ instructions	9.18
Lectures	4.08

2.6 Requirements About Training Modes

As displayed in Table 7, 51.51% teachers wish to have a training course in collaboration with higher education institutes. Furthermore, almost all the teachers that have ever attended the training course of the present mode are far from satisfied.

Table 7
Teachers’ Requirement About the Training Mode

Item	Percentage
Training in collaboration with higher education institutes	51.51
Integration of the county and prefecture-level training with teaching and researching in schools	31.82
Teaching and researching in schools taking the dominant role in accordance with schools’ development	16.67
The present training mode is already satisfactory	0

3. PROPOSALS TO MEET NEEDS OF TEACHER TRAINING IN ETHNIC MINORITY-INHABITED REGIONS

Through a critical analysis of interviews and questionnaires, the problems existent in the present teacher training programs are exposed; simultaneously, teachers’ expectations and requirements about the forthcoming training emerge into our sight. In response, several suggestions as to the teacher training programs are proposed as follows.

3.1 Reschedule the Training Course to Establish an Effective Teacher Training Mode in Ethnic Minority-Inhabited Regions

Whether a scheduling is appropriate and whether the training can satiate the real needs of the teachers have a role to play in stimulating their enthusiasm and in encouraging their participation; moreover, these two elements also exert a comparatively large impact on the effectiveness of the training. Additionally, there would arise some vacant teaching positions to be filled when teachers attend training courses outside, which is another important factor teachers have to take into account in deciding whether to accept training invitations; this is also a crucial determinant that directly influences schools’ degree of readiness to support the teacher training program. As a result, the scheduling and the subsequent problems after teachers go to attend training programs, etc. have to be fully considered and appropriately tackled.

3.1.1 Training Programs Should Be Appropriately and Effectively Scheduled

As manifested in the interviews and the analysis of questionnaires, most teacher training programs are scheduled to take place in summer and winter vacations or at weekends in order to cause as little interruption as possible to the normal teaching work. Since they occupy too much of teachers’ normal and legitimate rest hours, the enthusiasm and readiness on the part of teachers are severely impeded, thus diminishing the possibility of achieving the expected effect. The idea is derived from the questionnaires that 84.62% teachers would rather the training programs were scheduled within their normal work period out of two considerations. On the one hand,

their regular rest hours will not be engaged; on the other hand, they can also observe in person how the lessons are given in other excellent schools, by means of which practical knowledge can be learnt and skills mastered. As is seen evidently, it is the consensus and common expectation among teachers to schedule the teacher training programs within their normal work period, which must be heeded by the organizers of such programs.

In the ethnic minority-inhabited regions, the thorniest obstacles that have so far plagued the training programs include the irreconcilable contradiction encountered by teachers between working at schools and participating in training, lack of financial supports and ineffectiveness of training. Teachers generally have to overwork in these areas; moreover, the quota of authorized teaching positions is pitifully small. It is a combined consequence that teachers attending training programs have to compensate for their suspended work left undone during their absence after returning to school since substitute teachers can hardly be found in their stead. According to the analysis, 70.73% teachers think suitable a length ranging from one to two weeks per time for training programs.

In an interview, a teacher from an elementary school recalled, "The normal workload is already oppressively large. Finally comes the long-expected weekend or vacation over which I suppose I can enjoy a relaxing rest or spend it with my family or with some of my own businesses. However, it turns out to be for the training programs. If only it could be scheduled within the normal work period! If so, we could also be provided with the opportunity to absorb experience from exemplar schools by observing how their classes are conducted."

3.1.2 Reinforce the Training and Management of Substitute Students From Normal Schools to Exempt Participating Teachers From Regular Work

Since teachers in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions generally have to overwork, substitute teachers must be specified to continue regular teachers' work when they are taking the training programs outside. To exempt them from their work, one expedient strategy can be adopted, namely to encourage students from normal schools to take their place temporarily. However, these students are usually lacking in teaching experiences and skills, which would inevitably cause some loss to the normal teaching work and thus distracts the concentration of teachers who are studying outside, the prospective substitute teachers can be congregated by their own universities for intense training before they formally enter onto their internship as substitutes. During their substitute period, the aided schools can also commission their own experienced teachers to provide the fledgling substitutes with some instructions in terms of specific teaching and management. Thus, they can get familiar with the rudimentary knowledge and skills needed for teaching as soon as possible. With a combined instruction before and during

the substitute work, substitutes can play their part at the maximum of their acquired capability. Consequently, the normal teaching is continued without any impairment of its quality and the teachers are also relieved for the training programs.

3.1.3 Invite Experts to Schools

To eradicate the temporal contradiction between working and program-taking, it should be advocated that experts in related fields be invited into local schools for teachers to have a close contact with them. Perhaps, this is the training mode that is the most applicable in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions. According to the questionnaires, 51.51% teachers would like the training programs to be organized in collaboration with higher education institutes. This would make conceptually advanced, professional, state-level training accessible to teachers who have never participated in training programs in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions. Another unique advantage of this mode is that the training program can revolve particularly around the concrete problems confronted by the local teachers in their putting the new curricula into practice. By means of lectures, observing demonstrative lessons, experts' professional evaluation, equal communication with experts, and consulting, teachers are better equipped to implement the quality-oriented education as well as the new curricular. This mode makes it possible for teachers of primary and secondary education to receive the professional training from experts with the most convenience in such areas.

3.2 Pertinent and Practical Content Must Be Offered in Training Programs

Training content is decisive for the desired effect to be achieved since it is the main medium through which the training aim is to be fulfilled. The curricula are a critical indicator of the training content. Consequently, a curriculum that covers the specific problems confronted by teachers in their teaching practice would undoubtedly facilitate the achievement of the training purpose and amplify the desired effect; otherwise, it would be in vain. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to highlight pertinence and practicability in designing the curriculum since is the chief carrier of training content.

As shown clearly through the analysis of the questionnaires, 37.35% teachers share the consensus that the most demanded item is pedagogical skills. In consequence, the curriculum designed should feature such qualities as flexibility and diversity; different curricula should be designed corresponding to the diversified needs of teachers in differentiated development stages. Furthermore, the curriculum should be devised to cover specific problems in their local teaching practice and provide corresponding case studies that present some demonstrative solutions. Related theoretical knowledge should be simplified and the focus should be shifted onto

the practical instruction and the improvement of their pedagogical skills. In a word, the curriculum should be aimed at offering solutions to all sorts of problems occurring in their daily teaching practice in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions.

Over the interviews, many a teacher emphasizes that the training content should be focused on solving problems they get into confrontation with in teaching practice. Since the training program is very short in time, it is hoped that experts do not confine their lectures exclusively to educational theories. Explications about pure theories are off the educational practice and are of irrelevancy, as a result of which experts are advised to reduce the proportion of theoretical content in their lectures; rather, it is suggested that more practical case studies should be provided against the context of the curriculum reforms. Related pedagogical theories should be applied to the explanation of the phenomena occurring in the educational practice and be employed to solve practical problems. This helps to strengthen teachers' capability to teach and undertake academic researches, and can improve the educational quality.

3.3 Improve the Quality of the Trainers

As indicated by the questionnaires, teachers in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions show preferences of experienced teachers, experts on curricular reforms, advisors on the college entrance examination, university scholars and professors with diverse backgrounds as their trainers since they are both versed in pedagogical theories and experienced in teaching practice. The administrative department of education should coordinate necessary financial and human resources to establish a reserve of outstanding teachers. A directory should be made that categorizes different types of training experts under such headings as curriculum reform experts, researchers in higher education institutes, teachers with some researching work, remarkable teachers, and front-line teachers. This is like a directory that incorporates experts' basic personal information, their main fields of investigation, their lectures and reports and the research projects in their charge within the past five years. Through this information management platform, the administrative department of education can effectively select suitable experts in accordance with the training needs and require them to prepare related training documents. Besides, human resources of higher education institutes and centers for educational researches should be appropriately integrated with human resources from middle schools,

and a smooth communication between them should be established. This would help to create a training team comprising front-line outstanding teachers, experts on curriculum reforming, advisors on the college entrance examination and university scholars.

According to the factual situation in such areas and the analysis of the questionnaires, the proportion of front-line experienced teachers must be raised in the training team, more opportunities be created for the local teachers to learn from and consult teaching experts. Moreover, training teams are in demand that are acquainted with the educational characteristics in ethnic minority-inhabited regions and that can simultaneously instruct local teachers as to teaching and class management. During the interviews, one leader from the local department of education hope that the administrative department of education could train the so-called "grassroots experts" for them since such experts are familiar with the local educational features. In common with the trained teachers, these "grassroots" experts are also front-line teaching practitioners and share similar working experiences. Consequently, they can better understand the problems and difficulties front-line teachers are in the face of; the trained teachers would intuitively feel more sympathy for these experts as well, making the training more effective.

CONCLUSION

By means of a fieldwork investigation into and a statistical analysis of training needs of the teachers in the phase of compulsory education in the ethnic minority-inhabited regions in Sichuan Province, local teachers' requirements for the scheduling, content, method of training programs are revealed. In order to raise local teachers' degree of satisfaction with the training programs in such areas, several strategies are proposed: a) rescheduling the training program and establishing a new mode conducive to teacher-training in such areas; b) increasing the relevancy and practicability of training content and c) enhancing the overall quality of the training team.

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