

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN TRAINING TEACHERS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL NON- FORMAL EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Abstract: *China has seen significant changes in its educational landscape recently, with a growing focus on holistic education for primary school students. Alongside formal schooling, non-formal education has become increasingly important, seen as a vital supplement to traditional classroom learning. However, the Chinese government perceives the widespread enthusiasm among parents for non-formal education as a negative trend, hindering positive qualitative changes in formal education. There are concerns about the lack of control, particularly regarding ideological influence, educator training, and service quality within the non-formal education sector, which also involves substantial financial investment. This article, drawing from publicly available sources, assesses the current state of China's non-formal education sector and examines the measures undertaken by the government in the past five years to enhance the quality of educational services. Additionally, it explores the future prospects of non-formal education in China within the context of policies aimed at reducing student burdens and improving educational service quality. The focus of the study is on primary and elementary school students, as this age group constitutes the primary target audience for non-formal educational opportunities in modern China.*

Keywords: *elementary education, non-formal education, PR China, primary education, teacher training programs.*

Introduction

China's educational system has undergone significant transformations in recent years. Modern trends in the humanisation of the content, methods and forms of the pedagogical process, orientation towards the identification of the individuality of each student, place high demands on the personality of the teacher and improvement of their professional competence. The level of education and the degree of moral readiness of the younger generation for life and work largely depend on the teacher, his/her pedagogical competence and personal qualities. Moreover, it is necessary to install the love of learning from childhood, which requires increased attention to the training of teachers of primary and elementary

schools, who can teach both in formal and non-formal educational institution. It should be mentioned that the non-formal education sector has gained prominence as a crucial complement to traditional classroom learning. However, on the other hand, the Chinese government views the mass enthusiasm of Chinese parents for the opportunities that non-formal education provides as a negative trend that prevents qualitative positive changes from changes in formal education in the country. This article aims to offer an overview of the current status of educational services offered within China's non-formal education sector, with a specific focus on primary school students. Additionally, it seeks to examine the engagement of educational administration institutions in the People's Republic of China (PRC) with this socio-pedagogical phenomenon. Special emphasis is placed on the training practices for teachers intending to work in the informal education sector, highlighting the notable absence of such initiatives and the limited educational and pedagogical endeavors in this area. The methodology employed in this article encompasses critical analysis, systematization, and generalization of approaches to the discussed issue. It involves addressing tasks such as defining the non-formal education sector in China, identifying challenges and prospects in training teachers for non-formal education at the elementary school level, and summarizing the various forms of teacher training within this context.

Literature review

During the development of the article, the authors consulted two primary sources of literature: academic scientific publications and official documents from various governmental levels. The academic research encompassed studies by Gong Shi (2016) on the role of for-profit schools in China, investigations by Yu Hongnan and Wu Dongping (2020) regarding online learning among university students and the utilisation of mobile applications, perspectives on education hotspots as analysed by Huang Hao (2021), exploration of the development of private education in China by Fang Xiaotian (2019), and examinations of the distinctions between Chinese state and non-state educational institutions by D. Connor (2020) and Lan Ju (2019). Additionally, the authors referenced official documents sourced from governmental websites at different administrative levels:

- Advice on the organisation of teaching internships [AOTI] from the official site of Guangzhou Provincial Employment Bureau (2022);
- Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education [LPRCCE] from the official site of the State Council of the Peoples Republic of China (2015);
- Norms of a teacher's pedagogical internship [NTPI] from the news of education science (News of education science, 2022)

- Pedagogical internship practice [PIP] from the Chinese education online (2022);
- Regulations on the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Promotion of Private Education [RILPRCPPE] from the official site of the State Council of the Peoples Republic of China (2021).

Information gleaned from the "China Education Development 2021 Report" (Deloitte research, 2022) and "International schools in China" (International School Consortium, 2024) offered the authors valuable insights into the operational dynamics of contemporary non-formal educational institutions catering to primary and elementary levels in China.

Methodology

Studying the challenges and perspectives in training teachers for elementary school non-formal education in contemporary China involve various scientific methods. Literature Review (existing academic literature, research papers, policy documents, and educational reports related to non-formal education and teacher training in China) to help in identifying key challenges and potential future directions. Case Studies method was used for analysing the practice of successful and innovative teacher training programs for non-formal education in China that are introduced now to some of Chinese high educational institutions. Somehow the Qualitative interview method was used to study education experts', government officials', school administrators' and teachers' point of view as to non-formal education as a social and pedagogical phenomenon in China and its perspectives in the country. Comparative Analysis method helped to find out the peculiarities and differences in teacher training programs for future specialists who plan to work in formal and non-formal education in China. By employing a combination of these scientific methods, the authors of the article gained a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and perspectives in training teachers for elementary school non-formal education in contemporary China.

Research results

According to the definition provided in the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education," non-formal education embodies a comprehensive educational approach that integrates pragmatic political, ideological, and moral teachings with professional education. Its overarching goal is to harmonise the nation's and society's significant objectives with the individual aspirations of each person. Considering the realities within China, the term "non-formal education" encompasses all educational services provided by private individuals or other non-state entities, organisations, and institutes. This

interpretation aligns with the provisions outlined in Article 8 of the “Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education,” which defines "education" exclusively as "education centrally provided by the state," with the law's provisions applying to all levels and types of education within the territory of the People's Republic of China. Hence, it can be inferred that all types of educational services provided within the state but not funded by the state budget and not organised by or on behalf of the state can be classified as institutions within the non-formal education sector (State Council of the Peoples Republic of China, 2015).

Presently, in China, there are emerging efforts to integrate non-formal/non-state education into the framework of educational services provision on behalf of the state, although this process is still in its nascent stages. The state actively encourages, comprehensively supports, and provides practical guidance and management the non-formal education in the country and governmental bodies of all levels are mandated to incorporate non-state education into economic and social development programs, aligning with the objectives of implementing the state's development strategy through science and education, fostering the healthy advancement of non-state education, and safeguarding the rights and legitimate interests of non-state educational institutions and individuals undergoing education (State Council of the Peoples Republic of China, 2021).

China acknowledges significant progress and potential within its non-formal education sector, as defined by the state and society. However, as the number and diversity of educational services offered within the non-formal sector continue to expand, new challenges emerge. From the perspective of the Chinese government, the non-formal education sector is inadequately regulated, particularly concerning ideological direction, educator training, and service quality, while also involving substantial financial investments. The primary challenges and discussions, both in scholarly circles and the public domain, revolve around the following aspects:

- the potential of social pragmatism within the non-formal education sector (is substantial, considering the vast scale of educational service demands and human resource potential in China);
- sustained demand for non-formal education (reflects the challenging transition of Chinese public education from scale-oriented to efficiency-driven);
- state policies and societal support for non-formal education (present a dual dynamic: while the state restricts their activities to educational pursuits, the necessity to secure funding undermines the autonomy and independence of such educational institutions);
- challenges faced by Chinese non-state educational institutions (highlight the need for a more proactive clarification of their legal status within the country's educational landscape, along with specific

structural definitions and regulatory frameworks in political and legal operations) (Lan, 2019; Shi & Sha, 2018).

As of today, the People's Republic of China boasts a considerable number and diverse array of non-state educational service providers, falling under the purview of the "non-formal education" sector as defined in China. These non-state education providers can be categorised into two main groups:

1. Non-profit organisations affiliated with social and professional associations, trade unions, and various philanthropic entities.
2. Commercial entities offering certified courses within the school curriculum, registered with the tax authorities and civil affairs department. They are permitted to conduct educational activities only upon obtaining licensure from the local education department.

Non-state educational institutions in China typically fall into the following types:

- educational institutions established with government support.
- independent schools initiated by individuals or groups (often based on existing educational institutions).
- schools established with capital investment from individuals or organisations, serving as co-founders alongside a state enterprise or institution.
- tutoring services (Fang, 2019).

In major urban centres across the country, a comprehensive range of non-formal educational institutions is typically available. These urban areas often see the establishment of "educational consortia," which bring together kindergartens, schools at all levels, and even colleges and universities. Conversely, in medium and small cities throughout China, non-public primary and secondary schools (grades 1-9) are more prevalent. Meanwhile, in county centers and rural regions, primary schools (grades 1-5) tend to be the primary educational institutions. (Deloitte research, 2022).

The term "private schools" specifically refers to private institutions that potentially compete directly with the public education system, providing education from preschool through higher education. On November 7, 2016, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China enacted an amendment to the "Law on Education," aimed at fostering the development of private schools. This amendment came into effect on September 1, 2017. Private schools typically feature smaller class sizes (ranging from 25 to 35 students compared to 35 to 50 students in public schools), with an emphasis on English language learning starting from the 1st grade, which is earlier than in public schools (where it typically begins in the 3rd grade and with less emphasis) (Gong, 2016).

Another prevalent form of non-formal education is the international school

consortium (ISC), often referred to as an "international school." These institutions offer secondary education and deliver curricula for various educational levels (including preschool, primary, and secondary) predominantly in English, typically outside of English-speaking countries. As of January 2019, the ISC reported that China hosts 681 international schools with approximately 230,000 students. A majority of these international schools are situated in China's primary expatriate hubs, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Guangdong Province. According to Chinese regulations, international schools are exclusively permitted to enrol students who hold citizenship from countries other than China (with exceptions granted for students from Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, although their enrolment in schools in Beijing is subject to limitations). (International School Consortium, 2024).

Online courses, workshops, and webinars have gained significant popularity in modern China, mirroring trends observed worldwide. The formats and methodologies of online education in China closely resemble those favored globally, albeit with the state seeking to regulate this form of educational service. Public educational institutions in China, focusing on research and supplementary educational activities, typically encourage their students to utilize two state-sponsored internet platforms: Dowdou (targeting children aged 3-12) and CERNET (designed for middle and high school students). In 1994, China established the CERNET research educational network, which rapidly expanded and soon brought together 30 universities across the country offering distance and blended learning services. This initiative evolved into the National Open Education Platform, officially inaugurated by the China State Education Administration in 2002. The platform functions as a communication hub, facilitating exchanges, publications, and resource access for providers and users across all educational levels and educational forms (Huang, 2021). Presently in China, online learning resources are seamlessly integrated into the national education system, particularly in teacher training. Platforms such as QQ Live, China University MOOC, DingTalk, Tencent Classroom, Chaoxing, WeChat Group, Tree Wisdom, and Tencent Conference, among others, play pivotal roles in this regard. It's worth noting that individuals and groups offering such educational services are required to establish private enterprises, obtain licenses for educational activities from the local education department, and register with the local tax office to conduct these activities (renewable every five years).

Despite the widespread popularity of non-formal education in China, it is important to highlight the absence of specialised educational programs in the country geared towards preparing teachers to work with children aged 6-10 in the non-formal education sector. Consequently, professionals who have graduated from formal pedagogical institutions are often recruited to work with primary and elementary school students. However, in accordance with the mandated level of training for teachers of various categories, educators for primary and elementary

schools are required to attain a minimum educational level, typically a junior specialist certification, and undergo additional training as necessary (Connor, 2022). The additional training provided to elementary and primary school teachers must fulfil the following criteria set by the non-formal sector:

- equipping teachers with practical skills and abilities, known as "shuangshi" teachers, who possess not only extensive theoretical knowledge but also practical experience working in educational institutions.
- cultivating practical capabilities and skills, such as problem-solving through methods like planning, organisation, design, production, operation, management, and other applicable techniques (Guangzhou Provincial Employment Bureau, 2022; News of education science, 2011).

Young teachers often experience insecurity in their actions and professional capabilities, particularly when venturing into the realm of non-formal education. This uncertainty can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with both themselves and their chosen profession. In response to this challenge, a pedagogical internship program has been established to provide support to novice teachers in elementary and primary schools who are embarking on their careers. The pedagogical internship program for elementary education teachers destined for the non-formal education system typically includes:

- the intern teacher's engagement in observing and analysing the pedagogical practices of experienced educators, as well as their own teaching methods. They are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, devise individual plans (or programs), and implement them;
- the tutor (or mentor) undertakes systematic efforts to assist the intern teacher in gaining proficiency in independent professional practice based on the execution of their individual program. This involves providing guidance, feedback, and support throughout the process.

The tutor assumes various responsibilities, including fostering the intern's interest in pedagogical activities, motivating them to excel in their role, fostering their ability to perform professional duties independently and effectively, facilitating their adaptation to the institutional culture, and cultivating a creative approach to their responsibilities. This support may be provided on an individual or group basis. Chinese experts assert that a year-long pedagogical internship (or "teacher's assistant" role) enables young professionals to acquire essential practical skills necessary for future independent work. It helps them comprehend the structure and nuances of the educational process as a professional activity within a specific institution. Furthermore, it allows them to gradually integrate into teaching roles within the non-formal education sector as competent and autonomous specialists, thereby mitigating any perceptions of inexperience from

students and parents (Chinese education online, 2021).

In the People's Republic of China, a young specialist undergoing a pedagogical internship gradually integrates into practical teaching duties, typically being assigned to a specific class (which constitutes 45% to 55% of their workload). The remaining time is dedicated to engaging with the assigned class, establishing rapport with students, assisting with homework, organising leisure activities, and accompanying them to extracurricular events (News of education science, 2022). In broad terms, the activities of an intern teacher encompass three main areas: teaching, general pedagogical tasks, and educational activities. The key events and responsibilities within each component are outlined in Table 1.

*Table 1 Structure of pedagogical internship
(Guangzhou Provincial Employment Bureau, 2022)*

Directions of activity	Amount of time	Form of activity	Events
general pedagogical activity	up to 20%	group, individual, face-to-face	general pedagogical and psychological observation of the class; keeping a diary of the student's development; drawing up characteristics of students based on the diary; interaction with other subject teachers, school administration, local self-government bodies and other controlling bodies, parent committee; participation in methodical and other professional and organisational events organised by the school, governing bodies of the field of education, etc.
teaching activity	up to 50%	individual, group, face-to-face, distant	<i>first term:</i> preparation of material (including visuals) for conducting practical classes by the main teacher; development and verification of work on current and final control; selection of additional literature and materials for students' individual and homework; preparation of a student for participation in the Olympiads of local and regional levels; attendance at classes; other types of work at the request of the main teacher; <i>second semester:</i> conducting classes in the presence of the main teacher (up to 30% of the workload of the main teacher) - added to the types of work recommended for the 1st semester

educational	up to 30 %	group, face to face	development and implementation of educational activities according to the plan of the educational institution; organization of additional excursions, attendance at external events (in coordination with the administration of the institution), which should contribute to the ideological, moral, and aesthetic development of students; help in solving interpersonal problems that arise between students of the class; communication with the parents of students regarding the performance, well-being, and behavior of students in the class
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Another method of training primary and elementary school teachers for non-formal education involves preparatory courses conducted at the workplace. The duration and content of these courses, as well as the decision to enrol in them, are determined by the school administration and the individual teachers themselves. Even if the administration deems a young teacher adequately prepared for the job or if the teacher already possesses teaching experience, the teacher may still opt to take these courses upon their own request. In such cases, the courses can be completed during free teaching periods, concurrently with regular duties, or through a condensed program. Unlike pedagogical internships, which are typically undertaken only once upon initial employment, teachers can participate in preparatory courses multiple times, particularly when transitioning to new workplaces with differing educational models, methodologies, or curriculum frameworks.

Despite the widespread popularity of non-formal education, it is noteworthy that China currently shows limited interest in expanding the functional capacities of non-formal education institutions. This reluctance is attributed to the ideological monopoly of the state, which oversees the education system as its official leader and representative. Officially, this stance is linked to the "policy of reducing the psychological and educational burden on students" and the "state strategy for enhancing the quality of educational services." However, all initiatives in this regard are ultimately subject to state control.

Conclusions

Non-formal education has emerged as a significant component of the educational landscape in China. With a burgeoning demand for non-formal education among Chinese parents seeking to provide their children with additional learning opportunities beyond the formal curriculum, significant financial resources are being allocated to this sector. The government, keen on controlling these financial flows, seeks to ensure that they align with its educational policies and priorities. Furthermore, the increasing popularity and competitiveness of

non-formal education pose challenges to the traditional formal education sector in China. Non-formal education institutions, characterised by their flexible teaching approaches, specialised curricula, and innovative pedagogical methods, have emerged as formidable competitors to formal educational institutions. The competitive dynamics between non-formal and formal education sectors could drive improvements in both spheres. Increased competition may compel formal educational institutions to innovate and adapt, enhancing their quality and responsiveness to student needs. The coexistence of formal and non-formal education sectors in China holds the promise of a more robust and inclusive educational landscape, capable of meeting the diverse needs and aspirations of Chinese learners in the 21st century.

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