

A comparative study of compulsory education policy enactment factors in county areas — A Case Study of China's "Teacher Rotation System" and Finland's "Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism"

Yihan Zhang*

College of Education, Ludong University, Yantai, Shandong, 264000, China

Abstract. Educational equity in rural areas has gained growing global attention, yet challenges such as uneven teacher distribution and structural disparities remain significant. This paper compares China's Teacher Rotation System with Finland's Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism to examine how differing governance models and socio-cultural contexts shape rural education strategies. China's centralized approach allows for rapid implementation and targeted redistribution, addressing short-term gaps. In contrast, Finland's decentralized model--emphasizing teacher trust, strong preparation, and equal funding--supports long-term equity and system resilience. China's rural education reform could benefit from enhanced teacher professionalization, improved incentives, and equity-based funding frameworks. Drawing on both models, context-sensitive reforms can help build a more inclusive, sustainable, and high-quality rural education system aligned with 21st-century demands.

1 Introduction

While the common development trend of global education has been seeking equity, rural education remains an issue of concern, particularly in developing nations, of which China is no exception. With nearly half of China's schools located in rural areas, it is important yet challenging to offer compulsory quality education to those parts of the country. Equity in compulsory education remains a central concern in global education discourse, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. There is a firm belief in the necessity of universal primary schooling in different countries; however, there are still many gaps between urban and rural areas.

This paper seeks to establish how these disparities are dealt with under various national policies, with countries such as China and Finland having been chosen due to structural and yet; policy-active nations. Thus, China has a problem of achieving equity across a vast, socioeconomically diverse territory, while Finland, on the other hand, is an international leader

* Corresponding author: yihanzhang@m.ldu.edu.cn

in terms of regional equity of educational quality, including rural areas.

The reason for choosing China and Finland is that the former has carried out a centralized performance-driven reform, while the latter has adopted a decentralized trust-based system for governance. This contrast offers a useful perspective for analyzing the processes of implementing and reproducing the educational policies at the local level, especially in rural schools. Thus, it is intended to compare not only the results of policy implementation but also the processes taking place around policy translation, the encountered difficulties, and cultural factors that questioned the policy's legitimacy at the last stage for teachers' response.

2 Finland's Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism

2.1 Policy overview

Finnish Funding Formula, which is also known as "Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism", is a feature of the education system in Finland aimed at providing them with equal chances to receive quality education regardless of the region they belong to, for instance, rural areas. It distributes the public money proportionate to the number of students, along with needs-based funding and no performance or socio-economic categorization, with an ideology to equalize opportunities. It is a compensation formula for isolation, special needs, and immigrant students to ensure that all schools receive the necessary support to achieve the national minimum [1]. The broad purpose is to reduce the gap and create equal chances of success in education, to give any child in rural areas a fair chance in life [2].

2.2 Strengths

In terms of the implementation of the funding mechanism in Finland, there is a balance of certain centralized control, while the overall administration is decentralized. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, the core curriculum for learning is set at the national level and it has equality and inclusion of all groups of students [3]. Finnish National Agency for Education is also in charge of allocation of funding; it rationales the distribution of funds based on the enrollment of students as well as special needs; such as teaching students with disabilities and immigrants learning the Finnish language [4]. Most of the financing of Education services lies more on the local level, municipalities are given freedom in the spending of their money to finance teacher salaries, school constructions and other services, although the national standards have to be met [1]. Municipalities are only eligible for state subsidies that are required for areas more in states for example remote county areas or with high immigrant populations, to ensure equitable resource distribution [5].

There are potential reasons that make it easier for Finland to succeed in the funding mechanism in the county areas. The spending determined at the municipal level enables context-sensitive responses to the problems faced by students, while at the same time rallying behind national guidelines [1]. There is state aid for the mushrooming hard-core municipalities primarily benefiting traditional rural areas, socio-economically disadvantaged districts aimed at distributing resources fairly across the country [2]. The national core curriculum, aim and objectives working together with every school mean that there are no dual standards thus eradicating educational inequality. It focuses on equality; this funding caters to children with special needs, immigrant status, and those who require special attention and support to give all students an equal chance [5].

2.3 Weaknesses

The Finnish system, as presented above, has the following challenges below. As flexible as the approach to decentralization of spending is, it may sometimes result in some level of inconsistency, especially where the capacity of the municipal government is an issue. It is also important to note that socioeconomic inequality that has extended to remote regions of many countries arising/especially magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, means that Finland is not exempt from inequality in education. Amid these lacunae, this government had availed €68 million of funding to the most affected zones [6].

Moreover, although Finland has a very efficient model for accomplishing its goals in the context of Finnish context, it can hardly be implemented in other countries. The effectiveness of the funding mechanism can be attributed to the following factors: The small population of people in Finland, high culture differential and the general confident reposed in institutions in the country make it easier to implement policies as well as to implement them and to ensure the citizens complied with the same [7]. In larger and more diverse populations, such an approach would have to undergo a certain amount of structural adjustment.

However, Finland constantly tutors and finances teachers as well as addresses the needs of communities and inequitable resources, making it one of the best countries in equitable funding of education. It proves the fact that equity in education is more appropriately realized within contexts of a prospectively designed system rather than a compensating arrangement.

3 China's Teacher Rotation System

3.1 Policy overview

China's Teacher Rotation System is a national education policy introduced to address disparities in educational quality between urban and rural areas. Introduced as part of broader reforms to promote balanced development in compulsory education, the policy mandates that at least ten percent of teachers from urban or high-performing schools rotate annually to rural or underperforming schools, with a minimum of twenty percent of these being "backbone" or high-quality teachers. Further, there are provisions for a change of guard of principals and deputy principals every two terms of office to ensure that experienced leaders do not cluster in the resourceful schools [8,9]. The rationale is to reduce the quality disparities between schools and provide skilled educational personnel to students in these areas to improve the quality of education and equity across areas of China [10].

3.2 Strengths

With the use of the rotation system, the educational gap between urban and rural areas has narrowed. Recent research indicates that rural areas have experienced and well-trained teachers have enhanced classroom instruction, leading to better performance of schools [9]. These outcomes are in tandem with the overall goal of enhancing equity of compulsory education through direct intervention on staff distribution.

Furthermore, the policy is advantageous for China since it is easier to implement in a centralized country, which facilitates swift and uniform implementation across a vast and diverse territory. The hierarchical structure of these learning institutions ensures that directives from the Ministry of Education can easily be implemented across all levels with moderate ease, practically throughout all the developed or even the underdeveloped countries [11].

Rotating leadership is meant to bring change since change is an effective way of improving the organization. The infusion of fresh minds with experience and knowledge in school administration into the rural school settings may result in bringing about change in culture, management, and/or professional development of the existing faculty of instructors [9]. About this argument, it is worth stressing that the policy is particularly relevant for the short-term reforms concerning the improvement of teacher quality and school administration.

3.3 Weaknesses

Certain factors affect the efficiency of the Teacher Rotation System. Both policy objectives and the goals of generating competition and empowering consumers seem to be out of sync with teachers' self/ career goals. Several teachers are more concerned with employment security, promotion, or the desire to work near relatives, factors that go against the requirement to transfer, and, in most cases, to distant and less-developed regions [9]. Thus, even if offered privileges such as higher pay, considerations for promotion, policy findings show that they are issues that may not be worth the struggle for many teachers in other areas to accept a transfer there [11]. Sometimes, rotations are done in a bureaucratic manner as a way of fulfilling the requirements, oblivious of the consequences it has to schools that receive the teachers, as well as the appropriateness of the teacher to be transferred [9].

Moreover, there are individual challenges for teachers who relocate from urban centers to rural areas; these include marital problems, poor infrastructure, and getting used to a new culture and working environment. Additionally, rotated teachers may find challenges in comprehending the changes in the student population, curriculum type, or resources, which may alter their teaching efficiency regarding student responses [12]. The mobility of principals and deputy principals in a school has been said to bring problems of instabilities in school leadership and management; issues related to do with strategic development, staff motivation, and regular performances. However, one thing about the policy is that it often lacks the necessary backup structures for development, such as pre-rotation training, professional development, or even implementation structures that would help in the enactment of the policy [13].

4 Comparative Analysis: China vs. Finland

China and Finland adopt diverse approaches to promoting equity in rural compulsory education, reflecting their unique political, cultural, and economic contexts. Although both nations pay much attention to the issue of equity in access to quality education, the approaches to achieving this goal seem quite different. Comparing the Teacher Rotation System in China with the Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism in Finland gives useful information to understand how both systems try to address the problems of rural education.

4.1 Equity mechanisms

China's equity model emphasizes administrative interventions aimed at redistributing experienced teachers to under-resourced schools in rural and county-level areas. It also fights against the disparity in the distribution of educational facilities and tries to overcome the gap. However, the level of implementation of this system highly relies on the compliance of teachers and the overall administrative capability of the local education bureaus. While some areas declare the advancements in the quality of the educators, as well as in the accomplishments

in the educational process, certain issues such as teachers' reluctance, organizational and logistical considerations, and lack of support for the relocated teachers after the move [14]. However, it is possible to see that China has a centralised system of educational governance, which lets implement national changes in education quickly and targeted policy interventions in response to specific disparities.

Finland, by contrast, pursues equity through systemic mechanisms that embed fairness into the structure of the education system. This means that there is no discriminative policy in funding where some schools will be privileged to receive adequate and elaborate funding than the others; the rural schools, for instance, are equally in a position to provide similar services as the urban schools [7]. This significantly reduces the necessity of compensating for the inequalities that threaten to crop up from time to time, such as teacher rotation. Nonetheless, the ability to achieve this is to some extent limited by Finland's population and a rather homogenous society that could not be easily implemented in other countries with higher populations or diverse societies.

4.2 Governance and implementation

Governance models further differentiate the two systems. China's structure of performance management is normative, entails inspections and standardizations, and has a top-down approach. This model helps to minimize the quality of students' education and make required changes according to the national standards, but at the same time, with the help of this model, the teacher may feel an excessive load of paperwork and their work liberties may be restricted [15]. This is especially so in the rural region since there are often little resources available to ensure competence and capability to meet the set performance targets.

Professional autonomy, formative assessments, and local autonomy characterize the Finnish governance model. Moreover, teachers are considered professionals who should be able to deal with their classrooms with less supervision fostering creativity and motivating them from within [16]. However, such an approach may take years of building up institutional culture and teachers' training that are not necessarily feasible in other systems.

Thus, decentralization holds certain advantages and threats in each of the systems. While Finland utilizes it for the promotion of local innovation as well as contextual responsiveness, China's decentralized financing causes inconsistency in the investment on education and policy implementation starting from the state level, due to the differences in local government capability [17]. However, China's central authority makes it possible to provide unified national reforms and control, which might be a challenge for Finland's decentralized system to accomplish on a large scale.

4.3 Teacher professionalism and social status

Teacher perception and professional status also reflect these governance models. The job of a teacher in Finland is well-regarded by society, and their work is relatively centralized, which makes teachers motivated and less likely to switch jobs, even in rural regions. In China, despite improvements in recruitment through initiatives like the Free Teacher Education program, the teaching profession in rural areas is considered to lack forte development and social status [18]. However, China has been quite active in trying to improve the attractiveness of rural teaching through living allowances, policies, and career pathways, reflecting a proactive response to these challenges.

Thus, although both Chinese and Finnish systems aim for educational equity, their strategies are different in terms of origin, structure, and functioning. Both systems have put into

practice tools embedded with their institutional and cultural support, with their perks and bane. It does not come across as the laying down of one model superior to another, but rather as the sharing of lessons that can be useful in policy formation in all sorts of learning institutions.

5 Policy Insights and Lessons

The comparison of the Teacher Rotation System of China and the Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism of Finland entails paradigmatic differences in terms of policy tools, regulatory approaches, and effectiveness. Nevertheless, there are some differences between the two systems, their main focus is similar, that is the equality in matters concerning compulsory education in the rural areas. This common interest constitutes the foundation of figuring out lessons that both parties find relevant--not as templates for copying but as contextualized next-best practices that may be useful in future reforms.

In this section, therefore, cross-cutting lessons are highlighted that speak of principles that reflect common principles derived from divergent practices. These lessons do not presuppose that policies can be directly and immediately borrowed because it is still unclear how the Chinese educational system itself will develop, but the lessons do outline how the general values and approaches of each model might be incorporated into the Chinese system.

5.1 Contextualized pre-service teacher education

Both China and Finland stress that quality teaching depends on quality teacher education. To ensure that every teacher in every school is knowledgeable, skilled, and professional, Finland follows a set structural framework to produce and offer teacher training courses that are enriched by highly accredited research to allow the teachers, as well as enabling them to be authoritative in their classrooms. Although programs like the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program in China have tried to increase the rural teacher pool, the current training frameworks fail to meet most rural learning contexts, such as diversified language practices and multiple-grade teaching.

The Chinese authorities can use this best practice identified in Finnish teacher training by incorporating the site-based practicum and collaborative school engagements in rural and other teaching setting. There are reasons to suggest that increased cooperation between normal universities and county-level schools would allow the training of pre-service teachers who could be better oriented towards the metacontext of rural settings.

5.2 Enhanced incentive structures for rural teacher retention

China's reliance on teacher rotation works addresses equity, but faces the issue of a lack of sustainable incentives that support long-term rural teaching. Teachers are frequently experience professional stagnation, lack of social contacts after migration. On the other hand, Finland does not demand that one relocate since working conditions are equally endorsed and the exercising of a professional role is embraced.

Given these differences, several recommendations can be made to upgrade China's overall rural teacher support programs. First, China should provide housing allowances, quotas on mobility, career progression, and promotions, all of which would be linked to rural practice. They should also not be perceived as 'compensation for hardship' but as recognition of the professional contribution of rural educators.

5.3 Balanced accountability and professional autonomy

This is reflected most significantly in the area of governance: while China has a professional and centralized inspection system that unites requirements for performance, it limits creativity and autonomy, particularly in rural schools with limited resources. Finland deploys the trust-based model, and assessment is continuous, internal, and developmental for personnel rather than punitive.

Chinese authorities may think about implementing formative assessment frameworks that enable rural teachers to practice peer assessment, teacher self-assessment, and student feedback. They can complement national standards for the accountabilities, but will lessen the psychological pressure for professionals and foster the emergence of solutions at the grass-roots level.

5.4 Equity-oriented funding models

The comparison further reveals that financial disparity at this level is still a factor that hinders the education decentralization of education in the Chinese rural areas. Moreover, though Finland provides parity by means of having a non-differentiated national fund, the Chinese decentralized fiscal system results in disparities in terms of training and infrastructure between the developed and the less-developed areas.

Given these challenges, several potential approaches are proposed for China to consider or adopt in the future. For instance, implementing equity weights to allocate higher funding to counties based on need, rurality, or the severity of teacher shortages could be an effective strategy. These measures could be implemented jointly with other funding support in a centralized manner, accompanied by both fiscal audits and outcome evaluations. This approach would not only ensure equity among different areas but also encourage more innovative solutions without discouraging local initiatives.

6 Conclusion

China and Finland offer contrasting yet instructive models of promoting equity in rural compulsory education. China's Teacher rotation, as an approach to eliminating disparities in the learning process, is effective to short-term problems, while being insufficient in the structural and motivational aspects. Therefore, Finland's success is achievable through creating a compact system where trust, training, and equal funding prevail. When implemented in China, such changes would mean professionalization of teacher education, incentivizing rural service, and shifting governance models can pave the way for a progressive China with the envisioned rural education standards for the 21st century.

This comparative analysis of China's Teacher Rotation System and Finland's Non-differentiated Funding Mechanism underscores the diversity of strategies that nations employ in their pursuit of educational equity, especially in rural compulsory education. Rooted in distinct governance models and socio-cultural contexts, both systems reflect different understandings of what fairness in education entails and how it should be achieved.

China's approach, grounded in centralized governance, emphasizes administrative measures to ensure the redistribution of teaching resources. It enables rapid national implementation and addresses immediate disparities, but faces challenges in long-term sustainability, professional autonomy, and context-sensitive adaptation. Finland's model, by contrast, builds equity into the structure of its education system through uniform funding, strong teacher preparation, and a high-trust professional culture. While this approach fosters deep

rooted and sustained equity, its success is closely tied to Finland's small, homogeneous population and long-standing investment in teacher professionalism.

Rather than positioning one model as inherently superior, this study highlights how each offers valuable lessons. China's centralized capacity can benefit from adopting more decentralized, teacher-empowering practices--such as context-sensitive pre-service education, improved rural teacher incentives, formative accountability systems, and equity-oriented funding adjustments. At the same time, Finland's example reinforces the value of long-term investment in teacher professionalism and governance models that foster trust and local innovation.

Ultimately, the pursuit of rural educational equity is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It requires alignment between national goals, local realities, and systemic tools. Drawing from global experiences, countries like China can adapt relevant strategies that not only reflect their developmental context but also respect the professional role of rural educators. In doing so, they can build more responsive, resilient, and equitable education systems for the 21st century.

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