



The Practical Dilemmas and the Path of Breakthrough of Teacher Qualification

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Abstract

Currently, teacher education programs at universities are undergoing accreditation organized by the Ministry of Education. The results of this accreditation will directly determine whether graduates of these programs are granted a teaching certificate. How should teacher qualifications be recognized? By tracing the evolution of the dilemma of “granting” versus “testing” for teacher qualifications, this paper analyzes the reasons for the existence of the dilemma at the level of theoretical contradiction and practical foundation deficiency and proposes that the dilemma be resolved by reconstructing a teacher qualification recognition model based on practical rationality in the theoretical level and gradually improving the scientific evaluation system in the practical level. The certification of teacher qualifications is not just the responsibility of educational authorities and schools. It requires the joint efforts of the state, society, schools, and individuals to ensure that only qualified teachers enter the profession.

Keywords

Teacher qualification recognition; realistic dilemma; breakthrough path

1. Introduction

Currently, teacher education majors in regular colleges and universities are successively undergoing professional accreditation organized by the Ministry of Education. The accreditation results will directly determine whether the teacher licenses of the graduates of these majors are “issued” or “obtained through examinations”. According to “The Implementation Measures for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Majors in Regular Colleges and Universities (Temporary)” promulgated and implemented by the Ministry of Education in October 2017, it is clearly stipulated that “the graduates of teacher education majors that have passed the second-level accreditation can have the interview for the primary and secondary school teacher qualification examination organized by the universities themselves. The graduates of teacher education majors that have passed the third-level accreditation can have the written test and interview for the primary and secondary school teacher qualification examination organized by the universities themselves.” This indicates that after only two years of the national unified examination for teacher qualifications, the right to recognize the teacher qualifications of the graduates of teacher education majors that have passed the second and third-level accreditations will return to the universities, while other applicants [Applicants refer to those who apply for teacher qualification certificates, including graduates of teacher education majors that have passed the first-level accreditation and non-teacher education graduates.] will continue to face the challenge of “taking the examinations”. Whether it is more scientifically and rationally to “issue” or “obtain through examinations” the teacher qualification certificates and in what way the teacher qualifications should be recognized are issues that require careful examination. In April 2021, the Ministry of Education issued five documents, including “The Teacher Professional Ability Standards for Middle School Education Major Students (for

Trial Implementation)”, which clarified the basic framework of teacher professional ability for normal university students, namely “the teacher professional ability mainly includes the ability to practice morality, teaching practice ability, comprehensive education ability, and autonomous development ability” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).

2. The Predicament of the Hesitation Between “Issuance” and “Examination” in Teacher Qualification Recognition

2.1 The Mid and Late 1990s-2015: Direct Issuance of Certificates by Normal Colleges and Universities

In October 1993, the “Teachers Law of the People’s Republic of China” was promulgated, establishing the teacher qualification system in China for the first time in law. “The Regulations on Teacher Qualifications”, issued on December 12, 1995, stipulated that Chinese citizens engaged in specialized educational and teaching work in various levels and types of schools and other educational institutions should obtain teacher qualifications in accordance with the law. Detailed provisions were made on the classification and use of teacher qualifications, the conditions for applying for teacher qualifications, teacher qualification examinations, and teacher qualification recognition. On September 23, 2000, the Ministry of Education promulgated “The Implementation Measures for the Regulations on Teacher Qualifications”, and the teacher qualification system began to be fully implemented across the country. Since April 2001, the recognition of teacher qualifications has been fully rolled out. The recognition of teacher qualifications by normal colleges and universities for their graduates was generally based on the sole criterion of whether they had taken the two courses of pedagogy and psychology. This model combined teacher training and teacher qualification recognition, saving time and effort, but it led to the closed-door training of teachers, disconnected from the actual social needs.

2.2 2015-2018: Obtaining Certificates Through National Unified Examinations

In 2013, the Ministry of Education issued “The Interim Measures for the Examination of Teacher Qualifications in Primary and Secondary Schools and The Interim Measures for the Regular Registration of Teacher Qualifications in Primary and Secondary Schools”. Specifically, it was stipulated that starting from 2015, the teacher qualification examination system would be fully implemented, and teacher education colleges and universities would no longer directly issue teacher qualification certificates. The reform resulted in a national unified examination. The teacher qualification examination system completely separated the recognition of teacher qualifications from the system of teacher education and training, causing a binary separation between the training process and the goals of teachers, and to a certain extent, undermining the effectiveness of the courses and teaching in teacher education.

2.3 2018-Present: Combination of “Issuance” and “Examination” of Certificates

As stipulated in “The Implementation Measures for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Majors in Regular Colleges and Universities (Temporary)”, teacher qualification certificates will be obtained through two methods: “issued” by the graduates of universities with teacher education majors that have passed the third-level accreditation (i.e., Beijing Normal University and East China Normal University) and “obtained through examinations” by the graduates of other universities.

In summary, the recognition of teacher qualifications has transformed from being mainly determined independently by normal colleges and universities for their graduates, to being obtained entirely through national unified examinations, and then to a combination of examinations organized by some universities themselves and national unified examinations. This reflects the uncertainty of the recognition standards for teacher qualifications and the difficult choice of selection methods.

3. Analysis of the Causes of the Dilemma in Teacher Qualification Accreditation

From the uncertainties in the standards of teacher qualification accreditation and the difficulties in the selection methods, it can be seen that China's teacher qualification accreditation has fallen into a certain predicament. In Dewey's view, all the intractable predicaments in real life ultimately result from our difficulty in forming value judgments about specific situations (Feng Ping & Yu Zena, 2007).

3.1 Contradictions in Evaluation Theory

From the perspectives of educational theory and philosophy, teacher qualification accreditation is a theoretical issue regarding the selection criteria for novice teachers; from the above two perspectives, let’s examine the process of teacher qualification accreditation in China and analyze the theoretical causes of the predicament.

3.1.1 From the perspective of educational theory: Teacher qualification accreditation requires real educational and teaching practice experience

From the perspective of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), the formation of PCK is partly based on real educational and teaching situations. PCK includes subject knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, teaching method knowledge, knowledge of students, situational knowledge of teaching, and knowledge of teaching evaluation. PCK is the knowledge foundation for teachers to teach and should also be the basic criterion for teacher qualification accreditation. Schulman has particularly emphasized the four basic sources of PCK: the content of degree courses, the university education process, social and school culture, and practical wisdom (S. Shulman, 1987). PCK is not only acquired in the university; social and school culture and practical wisdom necessarily promote the formation of PCK based on real educational and teaching situations.

From the perspective of the professional standards of teachers, the four core concepts of morality first, student-oriented, ability-centered, and lifelong learning cannot be determined through written tests and brief interviews. Generally speaking, the standards of teacher qualification accreditation should be based on the professional standards of teachers. In 2012, China issued “The Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers (Trial), Professional Standards for Primary School Teachers (Trial), and Professional Standards for Middle School Teachers (Trial)”. These standards are the basic requirements for qualified teachers at the national level and an important basis for teacher qualification accreditation. The core concepts of the standards are morality first, student-oriented, ability-centered, and lifelong learning. The content of morality includes love for the educational cause and professional ideals, love, responsibility, patience, and meticulousness towards students, as well as personal charisma. These aspects related to teachers’ emotions and personality are mostly implicit factors that cannot be directly judged through written tests in the form of examination papers and brief interviews. Student-oriented education requires a thorough understanding of students’ personalities in long-term educational and teaching practices to implement individualized teaching. Ability refers to the skills used to solve problems in practice, and skills only become abilities when applied in practice. Skills are like a driver mastering the technical essentials of driving, while ability is manifested in the driver’s actual road driving. The improvement of ability requires a repeated cycle of “practice, reflection, re-practice, and re-reflection”. Lifelong learning further demands the long-term and lifelong development of teachers.

From the perspective of laws and regulations, teacher qualification accreditation only examines the applicants’ educational and teaching abilities. Article 10 of The Teacher Law stipulates “All Chinese citizens who abide by the Constitution and laws, love the educational cause, have good ideological and moral qualities, possess the academic qualifications stipulated in this law or have passed the national teacher qualification examination, have educational and teaching abilities, and are qualified after accreditation can obtain teacher qualifications.” Article 19 of “The Implementation Measures of the Teacher Qualification Regulations” stipulates “The teacher qualification expert review committee needs to establish several groups to organize interviews and trial lessons in accordance with the testing methods and standards formulated by the provincial education administrative department, examine the applicants’ educational and teaching abilities, put forward review opinions, and report them to the teacher qualification accreditation agency or the higher education institution legally entrusted.” It can be seen that in China’s teacher qualification accreditation, apart from academic qualifications as a basic condition, only educational and teaching abilities are examined. Judging teacher qualification accreditation based solely on academic qualifications and educational and teaching abilities is clearly too one-sided (Wang Lei & Xie Fei, 2023).

From an international perspective, countries such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom have clearly stipulated that applicants for teacher qualifications should undertake internships in primary and secondary schools for at least one year (Du Xiaoli, 2012). This one-year real educational and teaching situation experience is conducive to making more scientific judgments on teacher qualification accreditation.

Furthermore, the demand for knowledge in society is shifting from static knowledge to dynamic knowledge, and education and teaching themselves have many uncertainties. The “one-off” teacher qualification accreditation model is obviously unreasonable.

3.1.2 From the philosophical perspective: Evaluation judgments are mainly based on real facts

Evaluation judgments (evaluative judgment) is a term coined by Dewey. It is synonymous with value judgments. They are pre-predictive judgments of the outcomes of actions based on real facts. They are practical judgments and the final conclusions drawn after exploring the conditions and outcomes of the experienced object (Feng Ping & Yu Zena, 2007). Teacher qualification accreditation is based on factual factors such as the applicant’s academic qualifications, academic achievements, educational and teaching ability levels, educational emotions, and moral levels. It is a predictive judgment made through rational exploration and comprehensive analysis of the applicant’s potential for future teaching. Dewey

believes that evaluation judgments are composite, and evaluation judgments require a comprehensive collection of all materials related to the evaluated object. "Definite and unquestionable materials" are a necessary prerequisite for making definite judgments (Feng Ping & Yu Zena, 2007). Teacher qualification accreditation requires a comprehensive grasp of real factual materials to determine the applicant's eligibility. Among them, materials on factual factors such as the applicant's educational and teaching ability levels, educational emotions, and moral levels need to be collected in real educational and teaching practice situations, which the current teacher qualification accreditation model cannot achieve.

3.2 Weak Foundation of Evaluation Practice

3.2.1 At the social level: The ideology of "examinations" is deeply rooted

From the Sui and Tang Dynasties to the end of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial examination system, which lasted for nearly 1,500 years, deeply implanted the ideology of examinations in Chinese culture. Once a culture is formed, it is difficult to change and has a profound influence. The ideology that "scores represent everything" occupies people's minds and permeates their bones. "Examinations for every certificate" have become a law widely accepted by everyone. Examinations have also become the most impartial and fair method for qualification accreditation and competitive selection recognized by people. The recruitment of national civil servants also invariably adopts the examination method and is thus revered as the "national examination." The acquisition of teacher qualification certificates has smoothly fallen within the scope where success or failure is determined by examinations. It has gradually evolved from small-scale examinations organized by various provinces and cities independently to large-scale examinations with over 3 million applicants at the national level. According to statistics, in March 2018, the number of applicants for the teacher qualification examination in Shandong Province alone reached 350,000 (Baijiahao, 2018). It can be seen that the fate of "examinations" in teacher qualification accreditation may not be escaped in the short term.

Due to the long-term use of the single evaluation method of "examinations", there are numerous problems in China's entire evaluation system. The true subjects of educational evaluation should be schools, teachers, and students. However, in the current situation, the evaluation power is almost entirely controlled by government departments, and the true evaluation subjects lack the necessary autonomy. At the same time, the entire evaluation system lacks the intervention of third parties, resulting in a lack of effective supervision in the evaluation process. The only supervision is often led by administrative personnel, lacking the participation of professionals. Such supervision can only be superficial supervision and has little actual effect. There is also a lack of necessary modern evaluation means and tools such as network-based evaluation and scientifically reasonable and widely accepted evaluation scales.

3.2.2 At the university level: Excessive emphasis on evaluation outcomes

Universities often record students' growth mainly based on grades, and the authenticity and credibility of the recording of the growth process are low. They focus on evaluation outcomes, neglect the evaluation process, focus on the use of evaluation, and neglect research and education on evaluation itself. The greatest utilization of evaluation by universities is awarding scholarships and honors based on grades. They rarely consider and study the suitability of evaluation tools and the evaluation process. Let alone education on why evaluation is needed, how evaluation should be conducted, and the significance of evaluation. Students often have little knowledge of these issues. Universities often ignore the subjective status of students. Students are passive in obeying the evaluation results, and there is a lack of interaction between subjects in the evaluation process. The evaluation results are mostly used for feedback and archiving, lacking scientific analysis and effective utilization. For the learning problems of students reflected through evaluation, there is a lack of follow-up improvement measures.

In the context of the weak evaluation situation in universities, if the power of teacher qualification accreditation is completely entrusted to normal universities, on the one hand, it will weaken the scientific nature of teacher qualification accreditation; on the other hand, it will lead to the internal closure of normal education as individual entities. The training objectives set and implemented by universities, and the process of qualification accreditation lack social considerations and supervision, which will result in the solidification of the teacher training model and the inability to guarantee the quality of teacher training.

3.2.3 At the individual level: High employment pressure and violation of one's true career choice

Since the expansion of higher education enrolment, the employment pressure on college graduates has been escalating annually. In the face of the intensifying employment pressure, a certain number of graduates opt for teacher qualification accreditation merely as a reluctant choice. It is not out of a passion for education or their true will but often stems from external factors such as parents' desires, the establishment of career posts, settlement of household registration, job stability, etc. When applicants choose to apply against their true preferences, the teacher qualification accreditation will be

unable to objectively assess the applicants' original intentions and true conditions, inevitably influencing the final evaluation conclusion and leading to partial distortion of the evaluation results. In the long term, if the aforementioned graduates choose the teaching profession for this reason, they are prone to experience job burnout during the teaching process, which is not conducive to the enhancement of the quality of the entire teaching force.

4. Breakthrough Paths for Teacher Qualification Accreditation

4.1 Theoretical Level: Reconstructing the Teacher Qualification Accreditation Model Based on Practical Rationality

Dewey argued that evaluation judgments should emphasize practical rationality (Fu Tongxian, 2004), requiring a genuine examination of the real situation and making judgments on future development while standing in that situation Fu Tongxian. Teacher qualification accreditation needs to transform the existing model, taking the applicant's actual academic performance in school and their teaching performance and ability in real educational and teaching contexts as two fundamental bases, with the final assessment made by a third party based on the applicant's usual academic performance and 1-2 years of real teaching experience. Diesterweg once said, "Those who cannot develop, cultivate, and educate themselves cannot develop, cultivate, and educate others either (Yuan Yian, 2001)". An applicant's outstanding academic performance and good behavior at school are the primary conditions for becoming a teacher. "Testing jade requires three days of full heating, and identifying talent requires a seven-year period (Xie Siwei, 2018)". Only through a relatively long-term observation process in real educational and teaching situations can we make basic judgments on their teacher morality, student-centeredness, and educational and teaching abilities. The third-party evaluation, on the one hand, supervises and monitors the training process of the applicant by the university and the applicant's teaching performance in real educational and teaching situations. On the other hand, it makes the final judgment on the applicant's teacher qualification from a value-neutral perspective.

Simultaneously, the teacher qualification evaluation system should be diversified. Faced with over 3 million applicants from different regions across the country each year, the "one-size-fits-all" uniform model appears unreasonable. Different academic backgrounds and applications for different grade-level teaching positions naturally generate different demands. For instance, for applicants applying for teaching positions in art and physical education subjects, more attention should be given to their own skills and interview performance, reducing the proportion of their written test scores in the overall assessment. For applicants for teaching positions in kindergartens and primary schools, blindly pursuing high educational qualifications is inappropriate. The focus should be on assessing their mastery of basic knowledge and skills. Additionally, teacher qualification accreditation standards should also consider regional differences between the east and west, and between urban and rural areas.

4.2 Practical Level: Updating Evaluation Concepts and Gradually Improving the Scientific Evaluation System

4.2.1 Social level: Updating evaluation concepts

Undoubtedly, the talent selection model through examinations has played a significant role in the history of education in our country. However, its limitation of focusing on testing knowledge determines that it is only a product of a certain period. Currently, diverse evaluation methods and means are constantly emerging. We should actively explore more scientific and reasonable approaches based on the specific content of the evaluation and gradually dispel the idea of "examinations for every certificate".

The true subjects of educational evaluation are schools, teachers, and students. The initiative of evaluation should be returned to these true subjects. By fully exerting the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of schools, teachers, and students, they can become the true masters of educational evaluation. At the same time, effective supervision of the evaluation system should be carried out to ensure fairness and impartiality. Supervisors should be experts in the field of evaluation, strengthening effective supervision on the suitability of evaluation tools, the scientific nature of the evaluation process, and the rationality of evaluation conclusions, to the greatest extent possible to ensure fairness and impartiality. Finally, we should also fully leverage the advantages of network resources and conduct evaluations through network means. We should actively develop and research more scientific evaluation scales and other modern evaluation methods and tools based on network evaluation.

4.2.2 University level: Strengthening educational evaluation research and evaluation education

Firstly, strengthen research on educational evaluation. Educational evaluation is a branch of educational science that has its own laws and methodologies. We should increase research on educational evaluation itself to explore scientific laws.

Secondly, actively carry out evaluation education. Use the educational significance of educational evaluation to correct the misconception that educational evaluation is merely equivalent to scores. Actively guide students to recognize that educational evaluation is an important link in education and teaching, a test of the effectiveness of education and teaching, and more importantly, its feedback function. The ultimate goal is to improve education and teaching in a timely manner based on the problems detected in the evaluation. Return the power of educational evaluation to schools, teachers, and students. The return of this power will be more conducive to mobilizing the initiative and enthusiasm of schools and students to participate in the evaluation (Liu Yunsheng, 2024).

Whether the teacher qualification certificate is “issued” or “obtained through examinations”? Fundamentally, teacher qualification accreditation is a test of the effectiveness of teacher training. Accreditation is not the goal; the aim is to guide teacher training through accreditation. Universities should pay more attention to the process of student cultivation and aim at promoting the comprehensive quality improvement of students, rather than using the pass rate of the qualification certificate as the sole standard for monitoring teaching effectiveness. Overcome the concept of instrumental rationality, strengthen the concept of practical rationality, add more humanistic courses, focus on students’ value education, strengthen general education, and achieve a balanced combination of humanistic and rational education. This is particularly crucial and important for students majoring in teacher education. Universities should actively guide students to focus on the improvement of comprehensive quality rather than treating teacher qualification accreditation as an examination to prepare for. Do not forget the fundamental task of learning by putting the cart before the horse. A high-quality teacher training process is the foundation of the entire teacher education system.

4.2.3 Individual level: Conduct comprehensive and objective self-evaluation

For individuals, before choosing teacher qualification accreditation, one should conduct a comprehensive and objective self-evaluation. Do they like the teaching profession? Are they suitable for being a teacher? These are questions that they should clearly answer when choosing teaching as a future career. They should understand whether they truly like and are most suitable for teaching work, and fully understand the basic characteristics of the teaching profession, such as love and patience, being a moral model, and being content with a simple life. Then, they can measure whether they truly like and are most suitable for such work instead of following the trend and choosing the teaching profession out of necessity when facing employment pressure or other external reasons.

5. Conclusion

Dewey believed that the fundamental difficulty of human action is value selection; the fundamental difficulty of value selection is evaluation judgment (Feng Ping & Yu Zena, 2007). Value judgment has always been a difficult problem to balance. The accreditation of teacher qualifications is an evaluation judgment of whether an applicant can enter the teaching force. It requires a trade-off based on a comprehensive grasp of information and a rational exploration of the applicant's current conditions and what kind of teacher they will become in the future before reaching a conclusion. It is not something that can be completed instantly or in a short period. Therefore, teacher qualification accreditation is not only the responsibility of educational authorities and schools but also requires the joint efforts of the state, society, schools, and individuals to ensure the quality of teachers at the entry-level.

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