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Teacher Rotation Policy in China: An Analysis of Implementation and Impact in Primary Education

Yafei Cheng^{1*}

¹ Xinxing Vocational and Technical College, Xinxing City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China

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ABSTRACT

Teacher rotation represents a significant policy instrument aimed at addressing educational inequity and enhancing resource distribution within compulsory education systems. In China, this policy has been systematically promoted to mitigate disparities between urban and rural schools, particularly in the context of persistent gaps in teaching quality and resource allocation. This paper examines the teacher rotation policy as implemented in a public primary school in Beijing, involving approximately 1,000 students and an annual rotation of five teachers among a staff of 62. Through a qualitative analysis grounded in

policy documents, scholarly literature, and contextual implementation data, the study identifies the social, political, and economic drivers behind the policy, including pressures for educational equity, social stability, and the mitigation of school district housing phenomena. The findings suggest that while teacher rotation fosters inter-school collaboration and supports the collectivist ideals of educational equity, it also introduces challenges related to teacher well-being, adaptation, and systemic integration. The paper concludes with recommendations for school leaders and policymakers to optimize rotation mechanisms through improved logistical support, emotional recognition, and structural incentives, thereby enhancing both teacher engagement and educational outcomes.

1. Introduction

Teachers constitute a critical asset in educational systems, significantly influencing student outcomes and societal development (Van Veen & Slegers, 2009; Kilag et al., 2023). In response to enduring inequities in educational access and quality, particularly between urban and rural regions, the Chinese government has implemented a teacher rotation policy within the compulsory education sector. This policy involves the organized, voluntary exchange of teaching staff between schools—typically for a duration of one year—with the aim of balancing instructional quality, fostering professional development, and promoting equitable resource distribution (Liao et al., 2019; Wu, 2020).

This paper focuses on the enactment and impact of the teacher rotation policy within a public primary school in Beijing. By examining the interplay between policy design, local implementation, and stakeholder experiences, the

* Correspondence author

Email address: 18799642131@163.com

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study seeks to address the following research questions: What social, political, and economic factors shape the teacher rotation policy in China? How does the policy affect teachers, schools, and educational equity in practice? What challenges emerge in its implementation, and how might they be addressed?

The analysis draws on policy documents, academic literature, and institutional reports to contextualize the rotation mechanism within China’s broader educational reforms. It argues that while the policy aligns with national objectives of equity and collaboration, its effectiveness is mediated by local leadership, teacher agency, and systemic support structures.

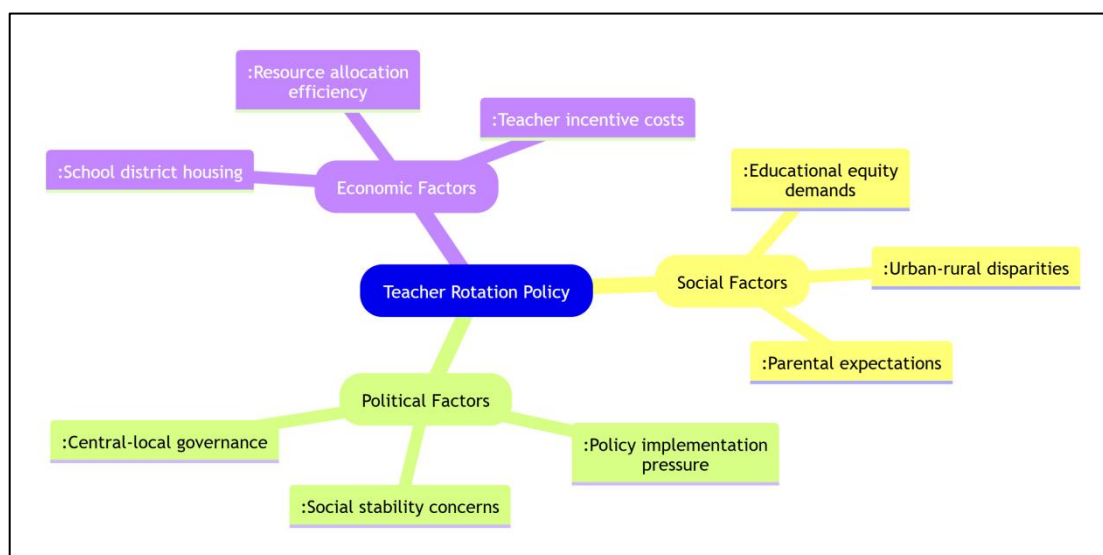


Figure 1: Multidimensional Analysis Framework of Teacher Rotation Policy in China

2. Literature Review: Teacher Rotation as a Policy Mechanism

Teacher rotation is increasingly recognized as a strategic intervention to reduce disparities in educational quality, particularly in systems characterized by significant inter-school variability (Lo et al., 2021). In China, rotation policies have evolved over the past decade from broad national guidelines to locally enacted practices, often shaped by municipal or district-level education authorities (Zhou & Ye, 2022). The policy is designed not only to redistribute “high-quality” teachers from well-resourced to underserved schools but also to facilitate reciprocal professional learning through bidirectional exchanges (Wu, 2020).

Theoretical perspectives on educational policy implementation emphasize the role of multiple stakeholders—including governments, school leaders, teachers, and parents—in shaping policy outcomes (Hogg et al., 2010; Gunter & Forrester, 2010). In the Chinese context, teacher rotation is framed within a collectivist policy paradigm that prioritizes social stability, equitable development, and the reduction of regional disparities (Guthrie, 2012). However, as Liao et al. (2019) note, the translation of national directives into school-level practice involves considerable interpretive work by local actors, whose sensemaking processes influence how rotation is organized, experienced, and sustained.

Previous studies have highlighted both benefits and tensions associated with teacher rotation. Benefits include enhanced professional collaboration, cross-institutional learning, and the diffusion of pedagogical innovations (Qian & Walker, 2020). Challenges, however, relate to teacher mobility costs, psychological adjustment, and potential disruptions to school culture and continuity (Wang, 2022; Zhou & Ye, 2022). This paper builds on such insights by examining rotation within a specific urban-primary context, with attention to the policy’s embeddedness in broader social and economic structures.

3. Policy Drivers: Social, Political, and Economic Factors

3.1 Social Equity and Regional Imbalance

Long-standing disparities in social and economic development across China have resulted in pronounced gaps in educational resources between urban and rural areas (Yang et al., 2014). Such inequities are reflected in the uneven

distribution of qualified teachers, with “key schools” in cities attracting and retaining high-caliber staff, while rural and peri-urban schools face chronic shortages (Xue & Li, 2021). Teacher rotation is thus positioned as a remedial mechanism to ensure that students in underserved regions have access to qualified instruction, thereby upholding the principle of educational equity embedded in China’s Compulsory Education Law (2006).

3.2 Political Imperatives of Stability and Harmonious Development

Educational equity is not merely a social goal but also a political priority in China, linked to narratives of social stability and harmonious development (Guthrie, 2012). Parental demand for quality education has historically led to intense competition for places in elite urban schools, exacerbating perceptions of unfairness and straining public trust in the education system (Xue & Li, 2021). By visibly redistributing teacher talent, the rotation policy serves as a symbolic and practical state response to these pressures, reinforcing the government’s commitment to balanced development and social cohesion.

3.3 Economic Dimensions: School District Housing and Marketization

A significant economic correlate of educational stratification in China is the phenomenon of “school district housing” (xuequfang), wherein residential property prices surge in proximity to high-performing schools (Huang et al., 2020). This market dynamic places substantial financial burdens on families and exacerbates socioeconomic segregation (Han et al., 2021). Teacher rotation indirectly addresses this issue by moderating the concentration of instructional quality in specific geographical zones, thereby potentially reducing the premium attached to particular school districts and alleviating housing-related inequalities in educational access.

4. Policy Implementation and Institutional Support

National and local policy frameworks have progressively institutionalized teacher rotation. The *National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)* explicitly advocated for “balanced development of compulsory education” and called for teacher and principal exchange systems at the county level (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2010). Subsequent directives, such as the *Opinions on Promoting the Exchange and Rotation of Principals and Teachers in Compulsory Education Schools within County (District) Regions* (2014), provided more detailed implementation guidelines, emphasizing voluntary participation, professional development incentives, and logistical support.

Complementary programs, including the Rural Teacher Support Program (2015–2020), further incentivized the flow of qualified urban teachers to rural schools through enhanced remuneration, career advancement opportunities, and improved working conditions (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2015). These policy instruments collectively reflect a systemic attempt to overcome institutional barriers to teacher mobility and to embed rotation within broader efforts to elevate the status and capacity of the teaching profession (Qian & Walker, 2020)

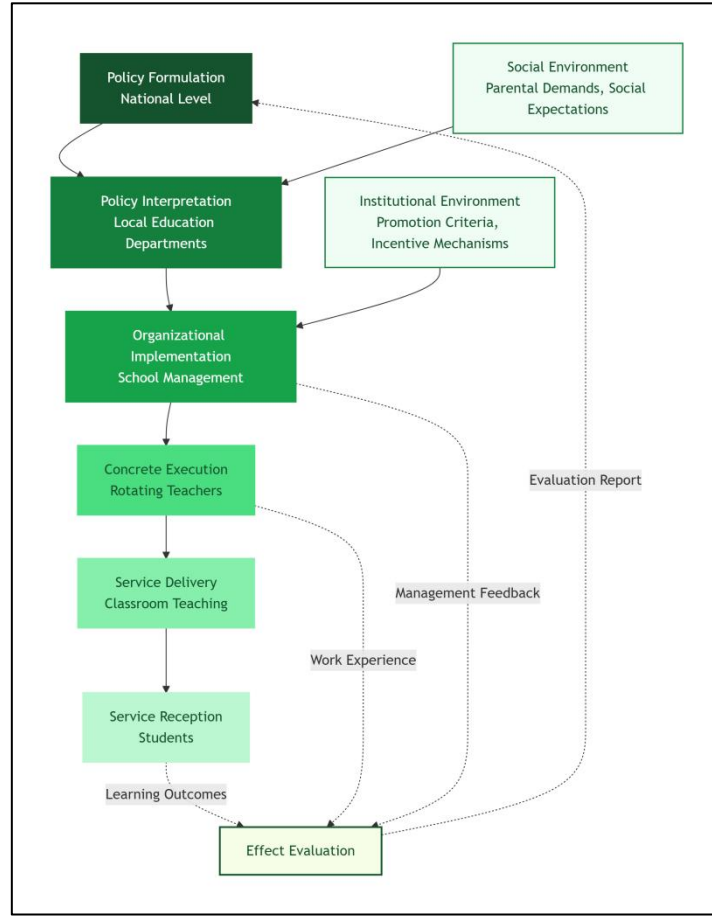


Figure 2. Stakeholder Network in Teacher Rotation Policy Implementation

Figure 2 presents a stakeholder network analysis of the teacher rotation policy, mapping the roles and relationships among key actors. The framework shows how policy implementation creates vertical linkages from central to local levels and horizontal connections among schools, while also identifying the support systems that enable rotation activities.

5. Discussion: Outcomes, Tensions, and Leadership Implications

The rotation policy has yielded several positive outcomes, including enhanced inter-school collaboration, cross-pollination of teaching practices, and greater equity in resource distribution. Teachers involved in rotation often report professional growth through exposure to different institutional cultures and student populations (Zhou & Ye, 2022). At a systemic level, the policy reinforces collectivist educational values and demonstrates state commitment to reducing regional disparities.

Nevertheless, significant tensions persist. Rotating teachers frequently encounter practical challenges related to commuting, housing, and adjustment to new school environments, which can adversely affect their well-being and job satisfaction (Wang, 2022). Moreover, the voluntary nature of rotation—though incentivized through career advancement criteria—may not adequately ensure the participation of the most effective teachers, potentially limiting the policy’s impact on educational quality.

School leaders play a pivotal role in mediating these challenges. Effective implementation requires that leaders not only manage logistical arrangements but also provide emotional support, foster inclusive school cultures, and recognize rotated teachers’ contributions. Leadership that emphasizes relational trust, clear communication, and professional autonomy can enhance teacher engagement and mitigate the disruptive aspects of rotation (Wang, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This analysis underscores the teacher rotation policy as a multifaceted intervention situated at the intersection of educational equity, social policy, and economic regulation in China. While the policy aligns with national objectives of

balanced development and collective welfare, its real-world enactment reveals complexities related to teacher agency, well-being, and local adaptation.

To systemically present the operational logic and intended outcomes of the teacher rotation policy, Figure 3 outlines a holistic pathway from policy initiation to goal achievement. This framework not only summarizes the key stages of implementation but also elucidates its multifaceted impacts on promoting educational equity, teacher development, and social trust, providing a structural reference for future policy refinement.

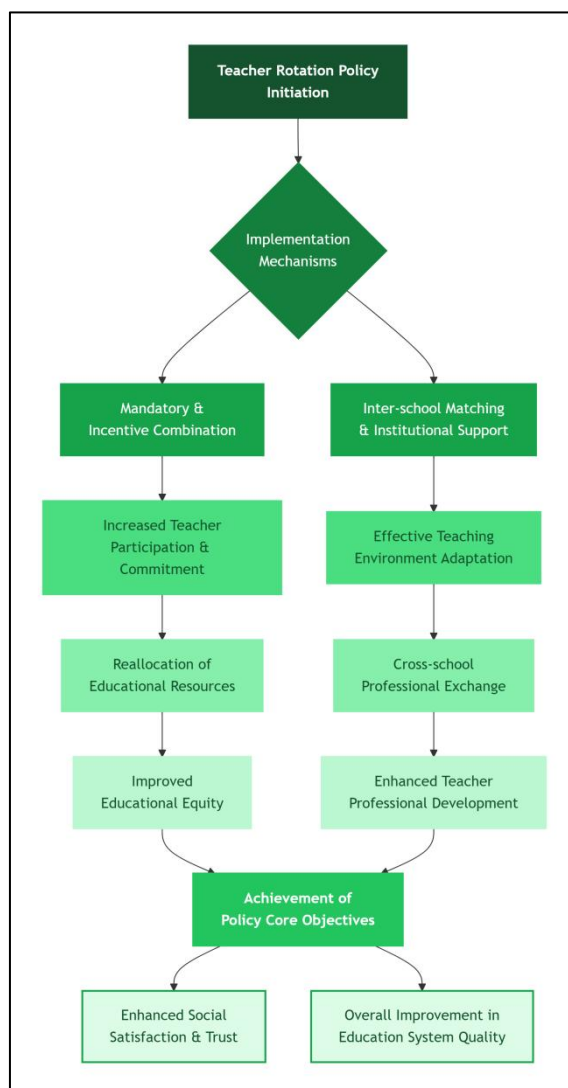


Figure 3: Operational Pathway and Outcomes of the Teacher Rotation Policy

To strengthen the policy’s effectiveness, several recommendations emerge:

Enhanced systemic support: Provide targeted allowances, housing assistance, and transportation solutions for rotated teachers.

Professional recognition: Integrate rotation experiences meaningfully into career progression frameworks, beyond procedural incentives.

Leadership development: Equip school leaders with skills in change management, teacher support, and cross-institutional collaboration.

Long-term evaluation: Develop robust mechanisms to assess the educational impacts of rotation on student outcomes, teacher development, and school improvement over time.

Future research could explore comparative models of teacher rotation in different regional contexts within China, as well as longitudinal studies on the sustained effects of rotation on educational equity and teacher professional identity. As China continues to refine its approach to educational resource allocation, the teacher rotation policy remains a telling case of how equity-oriented reforms are negotiated within complex socio-political landscapes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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