

The Implementation Status and Countermeasures of the Free Normal Education Policy for Rural Preschool Teachers in Sichuan Province

YAN Xueyi^{[a],*}

^[a]Chengdu Normal University, Chengdu, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the “13th Five-Year Plan” of the Social Science Research Institute of Sichuan Province, “Study on the Construction of Evaluation Mechanism for Free Normal Education Policy in Rural Preschool in Sichuan Province” (Proj. No. SC17XK053)

Received 14 January 2019; accepted 23 April 2019

Published online 26 June 2019

Abstract

The implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy for rural preschool is an important national measure to implement education and poverty alleviation. It can cultivate excellent resources of teachers for rural preschool and is an extension of the Free Education Policy for the National Normal Students. The investigation on the current status of rural preschool teachers graduated from the Free Normal Education Policy in Sichuan Province helps us to better understand the current implementing status of the Free Normal Education Policy for rural preschool teachers and to propose the corresponding countermeasures.

Key words: Rural preschool teachers; Free Normal Students; Education policy

Yan, X. Y. (2019). The Implementation Status and Countermeasures of the Free Normal Education Policy for Rural Preschool Teachers in Sichuan Province. *Canadian Social Science*, 15(6), 35-42. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/11100>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11100>

The Free Normal Education Policy for normal school students is an important policy promulgated in China to promote effective allocation of resources of teachers. It has effectively enhanced the social status of teachers, facilitated effective allocation of resources of teachers in various places, and to a certain extent promoted the integration of education in urban and rural areas in China.

The present study is based on the training of preschool teachers in rural areas under the Free Normal Education Policy in Sichuan Province started in 2013. Through the questionnaire survey conducted on class of 2016, 2017, and 2018, we hope to know their employment status and receive an overall evaluation of the policy in order to propose the corresponding countermeasures to improve this Free Normal Education Policy.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FREE NORMAL EDUCATION POLICY FOR RURAL PRESCHOOL IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

The National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Outline (2010-2020) promulgated in 2010 clearly stated that “We shall focus on sending teachers to the rural areas and improve the overall quality of the staff in education system. We shall also innovate the supplementary mechanisms for teachers in the rural areas, improve institutional policies, and attract more outstanding talents. We should actively promote free education for normal students.” In accordance with the spirit of the *Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Construction of Teaching Staff* (No. 41 of State Council [2012]), government of Sichuan Province launched a free training program for normal students in 2013 in order to provide teachers for compulsory education in rural public schools, preschools, and special education in the hardship areas of the province. The program is designed to cultivate teachers with high morality, professions, and the ability and the will to go, stay, and do well in the hardship areas. According to the *Opinions on the Implementation of Free Teacher Training* in Sichuan Province, the Free Normal Education Policy for preschool education in Sichuan

Province has been recruiting students who have graduated from the three-year vocational education in the province and have passed the final examination. After enrolling in the province's unified examination, students will study in the normal college for two years and receive a diploma after their graduations. The *Implementation Plan of the Sichuan Rural Teachers' Supporting Plan (2015-2020)* also proposes to improve the cultivation on provincial normal students, increase the training sessions, expand the scope of implementation, and reform the current training model. The Third Preschool Education Action Plan (2017-2020) once again promotes local supports for the development of supplying preschool teachers in rural areas and remote poverty areas through various means. It can be seen that the nation and local governments have provided a solid policy for vigorously developing rural preschool education and expanding the number of preschool teachers, reflecting the national determination to rural education and preschool education.

Providing basic and equal preschool education opportunities for the majority of low-income families in the rural areas is not only the focus and difficult part of popularizing preschool education, but also the basis for promoting education equity. The key to the development of preschool education in rural areas is the source of teachers. As the famous American scholar Linda Darling-Hammond once said, "the quality of teachers is far more important than other variables for the achievement of students". Preschool education in rural areas is the weakest point in China's education system (Neuman, 2011). In order to strengthen the recruitment of preschool teachers in rural areas, Sichuan Province has a positive practical significance in the development of free teacher training at the local level.

First of all, the implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy for preschool teachers in the rural areas provides training for a large number of teachers, improves the professional ability of them, constantly improves the professional development policy and quality assurance system for preschool teachers, and proves the overall level of the teachers. To a certain extent, it has alleviated the shortage of preschool teachers in the rural areas, the irrational structure of teachers, and the low quality of education. It has cultivated a group of preschool teachers who are willing to come, stay, and do well in the rural areas.

Secondly, the implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy for preschool teachers in the rural areas is an important measure for the implementation of education and poverty alleviation in the nation. It strives for equal and high-quality education opportunities for disadvantaged children in the rural areas, cuts off intergenerational transmission of poverty, improves the quality of the neighborhood, and implements the national poverty reduction strategy in depth. In the meanwhile, it guarantees an educational opportunity for children from poverty and promotes educational equity and social justice.

2. INVESTIGATION ON THE STATUS OF FREE NORMAL EDUCATION POLICY IN RURAL PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

The Free Normal Education Policy focuses on solving the shortage of teachers in rural education, improving the structure of resources of teachers, enhancing the level of education and teaching, shortening the gap between urban and rural areas, and promoting the balanced development of fundamental education. Since 2013, Sichuan Province has implemented the training program for free preschool teachers (specialist level) in preschool in the rural areas. In the past five years, it has delivered a large number of teachers to preschool and primary schools in the rural areas of Sichuan. However, judging from the feedback from the current training institutions, graduates, and employers, there is a lack of motivation for students, a weak sense of professional identity, and poor adaptability of employment.

In order to further understand the implementation status of the Free Normal Education Policy for preschool teachers in the rural areas, the author selected the class of 2016, 2017, and 2018 as subjects for a questionnaire survey. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed in this survey, and 234 questionnaires were collected. The effective rate was 93.6%. The specific analysis results are as follows:

2.1 Analysis on Survey Subjects

Total of 234 rural preschool teachers in this survey were graduates of the 2016, 2017 and 2018 graduates. Among them, there are 39 urban households and 195 rural households. The gender situation of 234 respondents is shown in Table 1. There are 4 males and 230 females.

Table 1
Gender of Subjects

Gender	Total Number	Percentage
Male	4	1.71%
Female	230	98.29%

Three rural preschool teachers who have already taken up their jobs are normal students from the Free Normal Education Program. The number of graduates participating in the survey is the highest from class of 2016, accounting for more than half of the total number. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2
Class of Subjects

Class	Total Number	Percentage
2016	124	52.99%
2017	45	19.23%
2018	65	27.78%

Among the 234 rural teachers who took the survey, they originated from 19 provincial cities and autonomous prefectures of Sichuan Province, including Zigong, Luzhou, Mianyang, Suining, Neijiang, Nanchong, Yibin, Guang'an, Dazhou, Bazhong, Ya'an, Meishan, Ganzi,

Aba, Liangshan, Deyang, Guangyuan, and Ziyang. It spans the eastern, central, and western regions of Sichuan

Province and is a good sample representation. The distribution of habitats is shown in Figure 1.

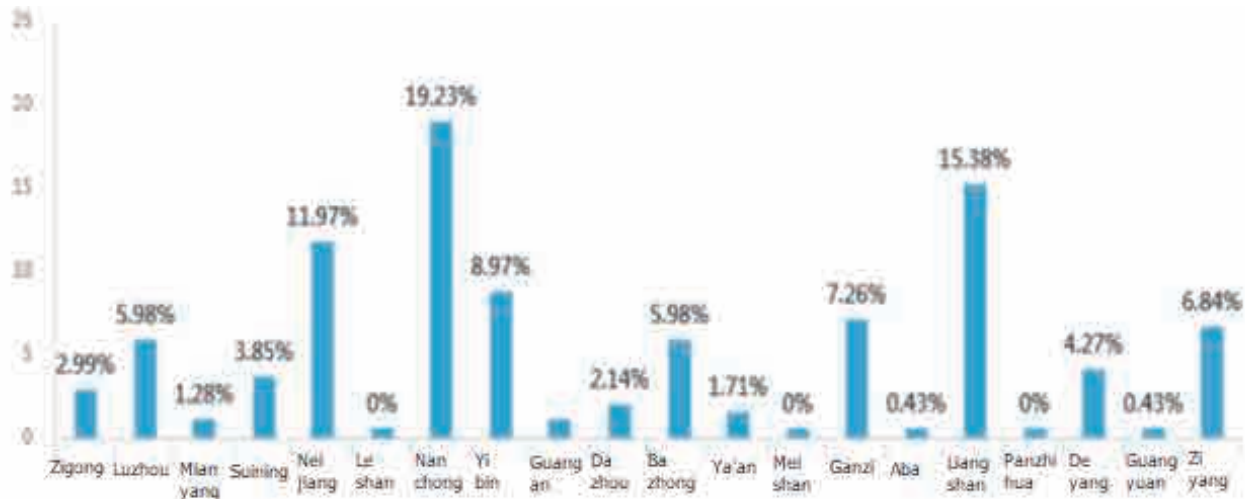


Figure 1
The Distribution of Habitats of the Subjects

According to the policy, the post-graduate teaching positions are generally located at places where the student source is located. The county (city, district) government is the main body responsible for the employment management of these graduates, and the county-level education administration is specifically responsible for the performance management of graduates. After graduation,

they will participate in the job fair organized by the education administration departments of the students. As can be seen in Figure 2, most of the graduates have entered preschool work after graduation, but it is worth noting that there are still quite a few graduates (about one-third) working in primary schools, and even in high school.

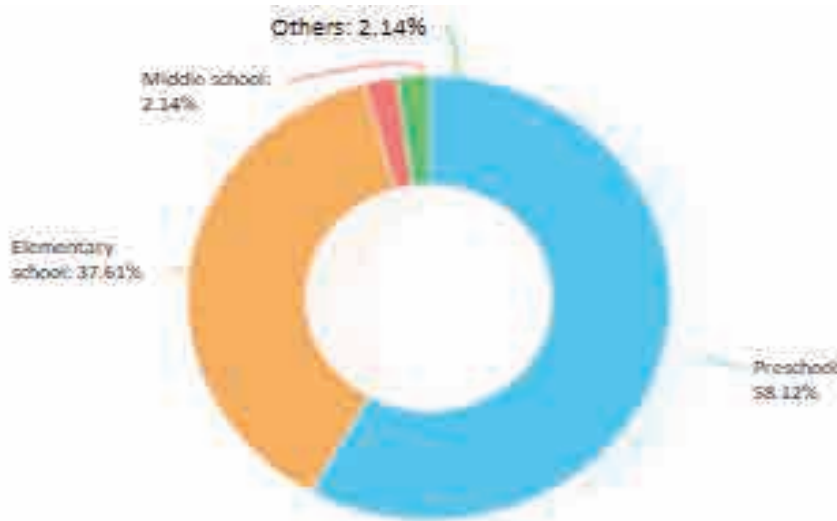


Figure 2
Schools That Subjects Work at After Graduation

According to interviews, because the education administration departments of each student source did not clearly indicate the number of recruits and positions during the annual recruitment, the graduates lacked understanding of the future employment units and job requirements and were blindly and arbitrarily applying for jobs. On the other hand, China's current situation of rural education is changing as a whole. In the stage of compulsory education, all elementary schools have affiliated preschool centers, but rural preschools are

under the management of elementary schools. In the case of insufficient teachers, the rural preschools will send teachers to the elementary schools. The center of their work was also transferred to the elementary school. In fact, many graduates have professional knowledge and professional skills for preschool education. There is a certain gap in the teaching methods and management methods between the elementary education and preschool education, which leads to difficulties in adapting to the early stage of employment and is prone to frustration.

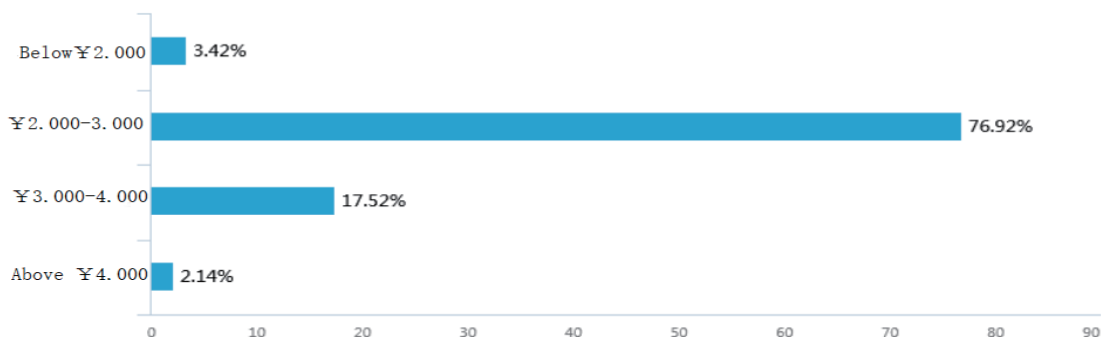


Figure 3
Monthly Salary of Subjects

As shown in Figure 3, the monthly salary income level of rural preschool teachers is overall very low. 76.92% of the graduates earn a monthly income of ¥2,000-¥3,000, only 17.52% of the graduates have a monthly income of ¥3,000-¥4,000. The salary of teachers is low in the whole nation, and the overall satisfaction of teachers is closely related to the welfare of teachers, in addition to the working environment, time, and job content.

2.2 Feedback From the Respondents on the Employment Policy of Graduates From the Free Normal Education Policy in Rural Preschools

2.2.1 Ways for Graduates to Get Employed

According to the policy, when cities and counties receive graduates, they should make overall plans, rational layout, do a good job in receiving and arranging work, and ensure that rural preschool teachers have appropriate

benefits. Before graduation, the education administrative departments at all levels should be responsible for arranging for the organization of two-way selection between the students and schools to ensure that each graduate can find a suitable position. In the actual employment process, the channels for students to get employment are more extensive, as shown in Figure 4. Among them, graduates who have received employment through the two-way selection meeting organized by local counties and districts and campus recruitment fairs account for one-third of the graduates. In addition to meetings organized by the colleges and universities, there are also recruitment fairs by local counties and cities and special job fairs organized by employer. Moreover, many free normal students take the initiative to contact the employer, showing the flexibility and adaptability of the policy in employment.

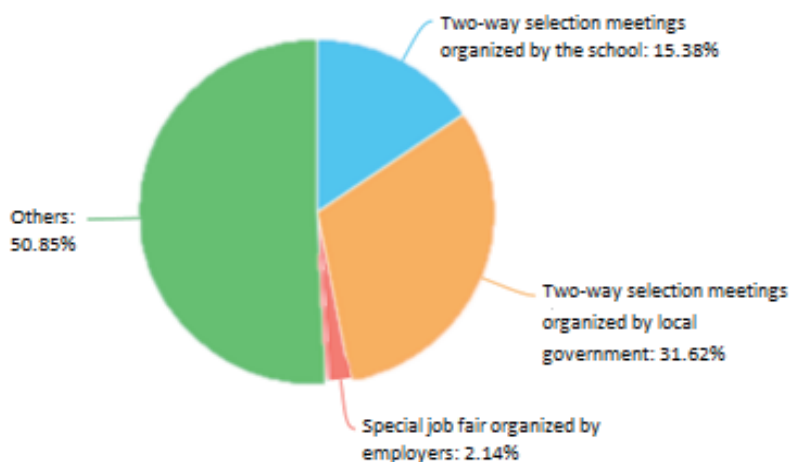


Figure 4
Ways for graduates to get employed

2.2.2 Employment Regions of the Graduates

The service period of graduates from the Free Normal Education Policy in rural preschools at the junior college level in Sichuan Province. The free normal students sign a tripartite agreement with the education school, their originated city (province) or the local education administration department (province) for examination and promise to return to the students' originated city (province) or the application service city (province). The time for

education and teaching in counties (cities, districts) shall not be less than 8 years. Among them, the employment period of rural preschools (excluding counties (cities, districts) and towns just outside the cities) below the county (city,district) shall not be less than 5 years.¹ For the five-year requirement for employment in rural preschool, there

¹ Department of Education of Sichuan Province. Opinions on the Implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy Development. http://www.scedu.net/p/0/?StId=st_app_news_i_x4001_28718

are still some concerns about the graduates. Among them, the most important concern is that they are too far away from home, followed by long service period and limited career development. There are also issues such as relatively poor living conditions in rural areas and difficulty in personal marriages, as shown in Figure 5.

According to interviews, because the number of preschool teachers given by each city and province is

different every year, when choosing the graduation service place before entering the school, students lack the overall understanding of the employment environment. After comprehensively assessing their own capabilities, they will choose cities with a relatively large number of recruits in order to increase the chance of employment. The biggest problem that many students facing is that they have to stay away from home for employment, especially girls, which has shown in the employment feedback survey.

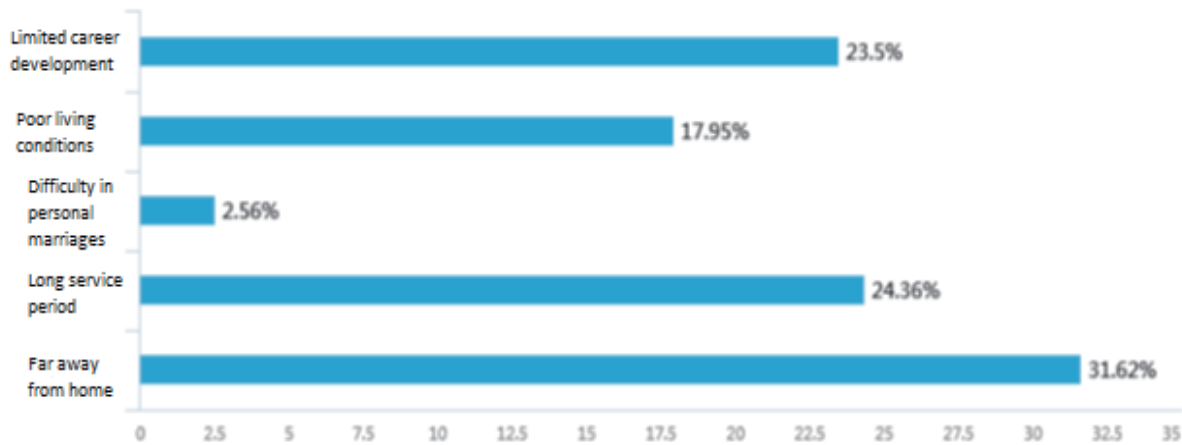


Figure 5
Concerns of graduates from the Free Normal Education Policy

2.2.3 Students Who Break the Contract On Free Normal Education Policy

In accordance with the relevant policy, if the graduates fail to return to the promised city (province) for educational and teaching work or have failed to perform the contract as required by the agreement, the tuition, accommodation, and living allowances that have been exempted shall be paid in full, plus the liquidated damages (50% of the total exemption fee). The education administrative department is responsible for performance management, establish an integrity file on the students, publish the record of violations, and record it in their personnel files. The Sichuan Provincial Department of Education will also report on the violation of the students.² Students have different views on this rule. As shown in Table 3, 36.75% of the students think that the provisions for breaking the contract are reasonable. Since the rural preschool teachers have chosen this route, they must truly fulfill their professional commitments. 28.63% of the students think that this regulation is too strict and restricts them with mandatory means. However, it is worth noting that 34.62% of the students believe that although the cost of breaking the contract is very high, some students still plan to do it, indicating that nearly one-third of the students' professional loyalty is not stable enough.

When students who plan to break the contracts are asked for reasons, as shown in Figure 6, the reasons given first focus on the long service period. They think this is the best stage of their career development, and five to eight years of service in the rural preschools are too long. In addition, after comparing the employment situation in other industries, one in four students can get better job opportunities by using family resources and self-employment candidates.

Table 3
Students' Attitudes Toward Breaking the Contracts

Attitude	Total number	Percentage
Too strict, can't accept it	67	28.63%
Plan to break the contracts despite the high cost	81	34.62%
Punishment is reasonable	86	36.75%

During the whole employment process, the students first focus on the prospect of personal development, that is, whether the employer can be a career development opportunity and environment; secondly, they compare the salary and benefits that the employer can provide. The employment locations, the quality of the school, the campus environment and facilities and equipment are also factors.

² Department of Education of Sichuan Province. Opinions on the Implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy Development. http://www.scedu.net/p/0/?Std=st_app_news_i_x4001_28718

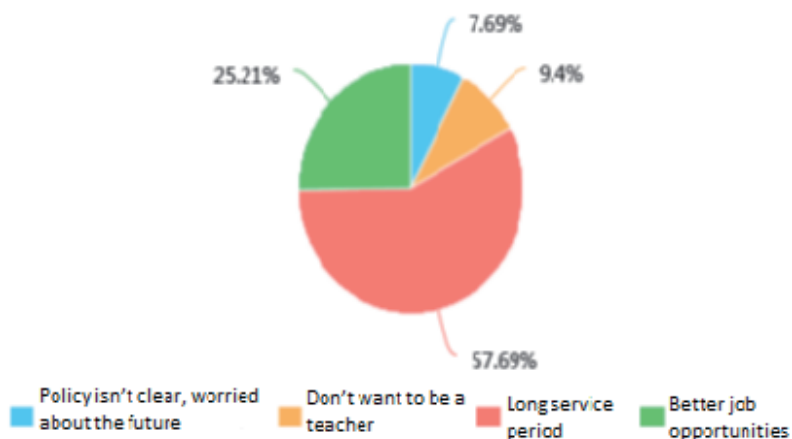


Figure 6
Reasons for breaking the contracts

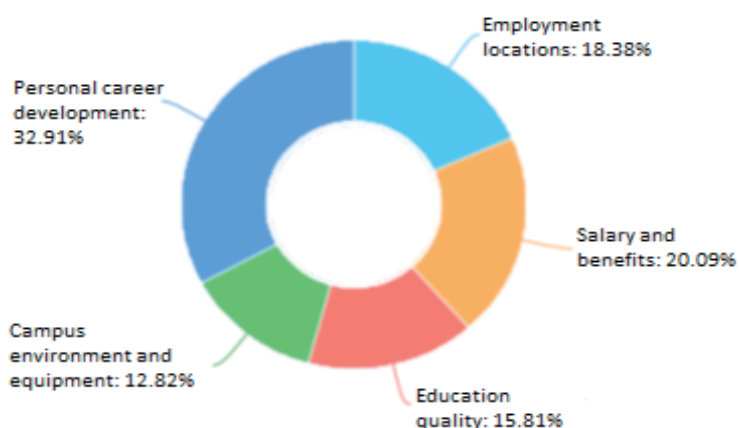


Figure 7
Important factors for students when getting a job

2.3 A General Understanding of the Free Normal Education Policy for Rural Preschool Teachers

2.3.1 The Influence of Free Normal Student Policy on the Rural Preschool Teachers' Work Attitude

Table 4
The influence of Free Normal Education Policy on the Rural Preschool Teachers' Work Attitude

Influence	Total number	Percentage
Take the opportunity of Free Normal Education Policy, which comes with employments, and students are willing to work hard in education.	26	68.8%
Students do not like educational jobs and are not good at it either, but the cost of breaking the contract is too high, so have to do it.	26	11.11%
It's hard to find jobs now, better adjust oneself to meet the need of the jobs.	47	20.09%

As shown in the table above, when asked about the impact of the Free Normal Education Policy on their work attitudes, 68.80% of the students pointed out that

due to the free training of the nation, with monthly living expenses during the study period, and jobs opportunities after graduation, they are willing to work hard and devote themselves to education. 20.09% of the students think that the current social employment pressure is generally high, so they will try their best to adjust themselves to the needs of the current work. However, 11.11% of the students still do not like the profession of teachers from the beginning, and they feel that they are not suitable for teaching or educating people. However, due to the high cost of breaking the contract, they can only try to survive the actual teaching work until the service expires and plan afterwards. The full understanding and high recognition of their profession and future careers is their firm belief in fulfilling their responsibilities after graduation and is the fundamental source of motivation for their choice to serve the rural areas. If the basic professional identity and professional identity is lacking, it will inevitably affect the stability of their employment.

2.3.2 Plans After the Service Expires

According to the survey of 234 students, nearly half of the students will choose to go to a better school after the service period ends, and 12.82% of the students will

continue to stick to their original positions and contribute their own strength to the development of rural preschool education. 11.54% of the students indicated that they

would change occupations after the service period expired. However, there are still 26.07% of students who have no clear plans for the future development of their careers.

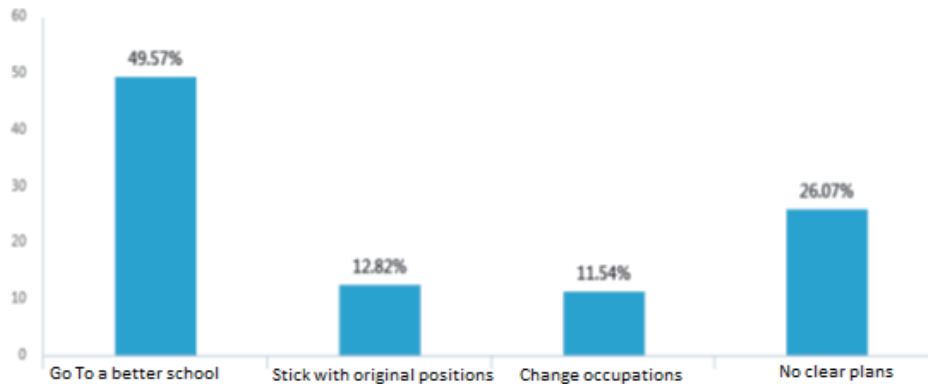


Figure 8
Plans after the service period expires

2.3.3 Understanding the Effectiveness of the Free Normal Education Policy for Rural Preschool Teachers

Table 5
Understanding the Effectiveness of the Free Normal Education Policy for Rural Preschool Teachers

Effectiveness	Total number	Percentage
Policy is excellent and can promote development in rural education to a great extent	109	19.23%
Policy is good and can promote development in rural education to a certain degree	109	46.58%
Some weakness in the policy and need to be improved	43	18.38%
Policy is not good and constrains personal development of the students	37	15.81%

The students have certain disagreements with the policy itself, especially the mandatory provisions on the service period. For example, 15.81% of the students believe that this policy limits their life planning to a certain extent. However, most of the students support this policy. They think that their effort is roughly equal to the income, and the policy can promote the development of rural preschool education in Sichuan Province and truly cultivate a batch of teachers who “are willing to come, stay, and work hard” in preschools in rural areas of Sichuan.

3. COUNTERMEASURES FOR IMPROVING THE BENEFITS OF FREE NORMAL EDUCATION POLICY IN RURAL PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

According to the analysis above, it has not been long for the local normal colleges to carry out the Free Normal

Education Policy. There are still problems in the stability and improvements of the policy. In the survey of the graduates, due to the fact that there are still issues in the enrollment standards, training program, assessment method, and withdrawal mechanism during the process of implementing the Free Normal Education Policy. Some graduates are unwilling to engage in the preschool teaching profession in the rural areas. After graduation, their professional identity was weak, and their burnout was more serious (Qiu, 2018). To this end, we must start from the all three aspects of the government level, training institutions, and the students, support this policy from a global perspective, and combine the actual situation of cities and prefectures in Sichuan Province to guarantee effective resource allocation of local rural preschool teachers and to maintain the individual rights of the students. We need to try to find the best combination of the two and improve policy efficiency to promote the effective implementation of policies.

3.1 At the Government Level

First of all, we must gradually improve the benefits for rural preschool teachers and improve the working environment of rural preschools. Safeguarding the investment in preschool education is a prerequisite for the development of preschool education in rural areas of our province. In order to stabilize the stability of teachers in the rural areas, we should effectively improve the material life guarantee of teachers, increase the teacher allowance in rural areas, provide humanized support in terms of service years, job selection, and guarantees of long-term employments, and create a respectable environment for the teachers. Secondly, we must expand the propaganda of the Free Normal Education Policy for rural preschool teachers. The education administrative departments at all levels and the training schools should increase the propaganda of the policies at an early stage. Through multiple channels, students should have a deep

understanding of the policy before applying for the examination so that we could truly attract outstanding students who are willing to teach. Finally, efforts should be made to build a scientifically sound and efficient evaluation mechanism. The construction of the evaluation mechanism for teachers in rural preschools needs to fully examine the actual development of rural preschool education and improve the suitability of personnel training. The government, training schools, education administrative departments, and employment units in employment service establishments should establish integrated mechanisms and jointly evaluate the teachers' performances, strengthen supervision and accountability mechanisms, and include the proportion of students who work at their originated locations as a source of the performance of universities and local governments (Wang and Zhao, 2018).

3.2 At the Level of Training Institutions

As an institution that undertakes the task of cultivating rural preschool teachers, on the one hand, it is necessary to optimize the quality of the students. The institution should improve the personnel training program and professional curriculum, condense the core curriculum and the main curriculum, comprehensively enhance the professional knowledge and professional skills of the students, and carry out targeted practice for rural preschool education. It should also innovate the training method for the students and strive to cultivate a multi-functional teacher in order to better meet the needs of the local (Wang and Yang, 2018). On the other hand, it is necessary to enhance the employment guidance for the students, take career as the main line, and strengthen professional awareness. Through the systematic study of professional career development modules and professional ideological education, the establishment of student growth portfolios, and other ways to help students understand the profession, understand the society, and scientifically design their career development.

3.3 At the Level of Students Themselves

Compared with other occupations, teaching profession requires teachers to take responsibility from their professional beliefs and responsibilities as teachers. It is particularly important to develop rural preschool education and provide a solid job security for preschool teachers. In addition to strengthening external security and maintaining the teachers, it is more important for the teachers to focus on their inner consciousness and emotional retention for occupational support. Schools should not only retain teachers' physical appearances, but also their willingness to stay and teach (Zhao, 2019). We should inspire rural preschool teachers to actively

participate in rural preschool education in order to form a professional consciousness. Therefore, we must first correct the attitude of learning, take both the theory and practice into account, strengthen internal and external cultivation, and enhance professionalism. We should encourage the love of preschool education and the value of the Free Normal Education Policy for preschool and enhance professional self-confidence and identity. Secondly, it is necessary to enhance the professional commitment of the students. Professional commitment means that students can accept and identify their majors and are willing to make great personal efforts (Yan and Long, 2008). Through the teacher's moral education, curriculum guidance, role model demonstration, etc., the free students can actively fulfill their social responsibilities while protecting their personal interests provided by the policy, undertake the obligations in the policy, devote themselves to rural preschool education, and become an excellent teacher who loves his profession.

REFERENCES

- Department of Education of Sichuan Province. *Opinions on the Implementation of the Free Normal Education Policy Development*. http://www.scedu.net/p/0/?StId=st_app_news_i_x4001_28718.
- Neuman, S. (2011). *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Programs that Break the Cycle of Poverty* (M. Li & L. Huo, Trans., p.4). Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House.
- Qiu, Y. (2018). A study on the motivation for students to apply the five-year free normal education examination—Taking Chengdu Normal University as an example. *Journal of Sichuan College of Education*, (7), 47.
- Wang, Y., & Zhao, Q. (2018). The current employment situation and countermeasures of teachers from the policy in preschool education from the perspective of policy benefit analysis. *Journal of Shaanxi Xueqian Normal University*, (5), 111.
- Wang, Z., & Yang, Y. (2018). Local students from the free normal education policy: analysis on the policy and investigation on the current situation. *Educational Research*, (5), 81.
- Yan, Y., & Long, L. (2008). Research on the psychological structure and influencing factors of college students' professional commitment. *Journal of Higher Education*, (6), 90-97.
- Zhao, X. (2019). The idea and path of promoting the professional attraction of teachers in rural and ethnic areas. *Educational Research*, (1), 138.