Chapter 17

Achieving Rural Teachers’ Development Through a WeChat Professional Learning Community: Two Cases From Guangdong Province

Xue Zheng
East China Normal University, China

Haixia Liu
LuoGang Middle School, China

Dongmei Lin
NaLong Primary School, China

Jiacheng Li
East China Normal University, China

ABSTRACT

WeChat group is a new network communication platform, which gradually influences rural teachers’ development and brings some specific issues into schooling. This chapter focuses on two rural banzhuren, Ms. Liu and Ms. Lin, from Guangdong Province, to explore WeChat groups’ influences on rural teachers’ development. On the basis of interviews and data analysis, the authors summarize the main activities that the two rural banzhurens have taken part in; outline the development they have obtained in three areas, including courage, benevolence, and wisdom; examine how rural teachers achieve their development based on the WeChat group; and discuss the limitations of this online tool.

INTRODUCTION

Rural compulsory education includes 2,800,890 teachers and 37,983,199 students (The National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Indeed, the promotion of the development of rural compulsory education is paramount to revitalize education in China. To improve the quality of rural compulsory education, it is important to encourage rural teachers’ development and allocate teachers appropriately. Research has shown that rural teachers’ development directly determines the design and quality of rural education (Xiao, 2011).
Rural banzhurens are the backbone of the rural teaching community. The position of banzhuren was set up in 1952 in China, and was formally adopted in 1979 (Chen, 2007). Since 1979, in China, each class has a banzhuren, who is the main person that looks after students, cares about students’ moral education, and is the mentor of primary and middle school students (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2009). He/she is the person responsible for class management, and also acts as a coordinator for subject area teachers. Research suggests that banzhurens are often closer to students than the subject area teachers are (Zhang, 2011). Therefore, promoting rural banzhurens’ development is a way to support rural teachers’ and students’ development as a whole.

WeChat is an online communication platform by which people can share pictures, messages, and videos. Research shows that it is interactive, resourceful, and widely used in China (Sun, 2015). Also, a WeChat group is a useful way for researching (Wang & Yue, 2016) and is an efficient way for banzhurens to manage classes and cooperate with parents. WeChat groups are widely used in class management and are helpful in banzhurens’ daily work (Zhang, 2015). Research also showed that a WeChat group is a platform for teachers’ professional development (Li, 2016) and specifically can be used as a new way to promote rural teachers’ development.

For the purposes of this study, under the organization of a professor, many teachers and researchers, who are interested in studying rural teachers, especially rural banzhurens’ development, joined a WeChat group named “Research on Rural Banzhurens’ Work and Development” on 23 July 2016. In this WeChat group, they communicated with each other, posted problems and asked for help concerning banzhurens’ daily work, and shared photos of their activities and research results. In the WeChat group, it is surprising how rapidly Ms. Liu and Ms. Lin (the two rural banzhurens used in our research project) developed their skills. The authors’ research purpose was to analyze how WeChat contributed to their development.

BACKGROUND

The situation of rural teachers’ development is not always favorable. Research literature has shown that rural teachers are often poor, and their workload is heavy (Sun & Lin, 2014). They have few opportunities to benefit from teacher training, while at the same time enduring heavy teaching loads (Zhou, 2015). In addition, the aim of the training is often unclear when rural teachers are given opportunities for professional development training (Huang, 2008). Given these conditions, many teachers do not want to be banzhurens.

It is widely recognized that the Chinese government should provide strong support for rural teachers’ development. A plan was designed and published to improve rural teachers’ poor quality and strengthen teachers’ training in rural schools and weak urban schools (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2005). Another policy, published in 2010, also proposed to focus on improving the quality of rural teachers and to give teacher awards for long-term teaching in the countryside (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2010). The Plan of Supporting Rural Teachers (2015-2020) proposed to expand channels to add rural teachers and improve rural teachers’ wages (General Office of the State Council, 2015). As for banzhurens, The Training Program of National Primary and Secondary School established that all new banzhurens should take part in training before they take on their role (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2006).