



Understand an emerging “failure” of an equality-oriented teacher policy in China: A job search perspective



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ABSTRACT

Free Teacher Education (FTE) is a Chinese case of equality-oriented teacher policies which aim to equalize teacher quality for high-need contexts. Recent studies consistently find that FTE's goal is failing. The present study is aimed to understand this emerging “failure” from a job search perspective. Drawing on interview data with fourteen teachers, we find that teacher's preferences, policy interventions and contextual factors jointly shaped the teachers' decision making on whether, where, and which school to teach. This study concludes that equality-oriented teacher policies are more likely to succeed if they offer generous benefits to participating teachers, tightly tie teachers' obligation to working in high-need schools, and provide necessary administrative arrangements so as to secure faithful implementation on the ground.

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1. Introduction

Teacher quality is consequential to student learning experiences and outcomes (Paulick, Retelsdorf & Möller, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Harris & Sass, 2011), but quality teachers are often unequally distributed across schools in many countries (Chudgar & Luschei, 2013; Akiba, LeTendre & Scribner, 2007). In general, schools located in under-resourced contexts (e.g., urban areas in the U.S.) are more likely to be staffed with less qualified teachers (Boyd, Loeb, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2003; Raudenbush & Bhumirat, 1992). Many governments have thus been implementing various forms of equality-oriented teacher policies (e.g., the “Teach for America” program in the U.S.) in order to address this global issue in their respective social contexts (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

In recent decades, China—a county with the largest and very diverse population in the world, has been catching the eyes of the world for its economic growth and it is thereby labeled as “the awakening dragon” (Wu, 2004). However, such labeling tends to conceal the fact that the Chinese society is becoming increasingly unequal for people from different regions, social classes, or ethnic groups (Whyte, 2010). Due to the long-standing urban-rural divide, China's rural schools are often staffed with significantly less and “lower” quality teachers than their urban counterparts (Han, 2013; Ayoroa, Bailey, Thompson & Geo-Jaja, 2007). What is worse, the urban-rural teacher quality gap seems to be widening in recent years (Xue & Li, 2015).

In addition, driven by the economic resurgence since 1980s, China's higher education experienced an unprecedented growth over the past decades. However, rural and urban families do not equally benefit from the expansion of higher education. Many rural families find it increasingly difficult to send their children to colleges because of the soaring costs of

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higher education and the disproportional increase of their incomes. The unequal affordability for higher education has exacerbated the urban–rural educational unfairness (Mok & Jiang, 2017; Hannum, Park & Cheng, 2007).

Under the backdrop delineated above, the Chinese government has enacted a set of policies in order to equalize students' access to educational resources and opportunities between urban and rural schools. The Free Teacher Education (FTE) policy is a major component of that broad agenda (Yuan & Lee, 2015; Wang & Gao, 2013). The central idea of FTE is to use free college education and guaranteed jobs to attract high school graduates to become teachers in impoverished provinces in China and mandate those who are employed by urban schools to serve in rural schools for two years first (China's Ministry of Education, 2007). However, recent studies found that although the majority of the FTE participants ended up teaching in the impoverished provinces as mandated by the policy, very few of them chose to teach in rural schools within these provinces; in addition, many of those who were employed by urban schools failed to fulfill their obligations of teaching in rural schools for the first two years (Gao, 2009; Luo & Mkandawire, 2015; Zhou, 2010). The reported unintended outcome has caused serious public concerns about the effectiveness of this policy.

Rich international evidence on teacher policy implementation has shown that teachers are not “puppets” but active players in shaping policy outcomes (McDermott & Allen, 2015; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). It is a series of decisions made by teachers during their job search process, in particular the decisions about whether, where, and which school to teach that finally lead to their employment outcomes. Thus, while equality-oriented teacher policies might orient teachers in their career trajectory, it is equally important to consider teachers' individual motives and experiences in becoming a teacher in specific contexts (Yuan & Zhang, 2017).

To date, despite a growing body of literature on teachers' cognitions and motivation in the process of learning to teach (e.g., Yuan, 2016; Kim, & Cho, 2014), scant attention has been paid to their job search process linking their pre-service teacher education (as a student teacher) and school teaching (as a full teacher). In particular, there is limited research on FTE teachers' job search process mediated by the FTE policy interventions and local contexts for teaching. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this study seeks to investigate the job search experiences of fourteen teachers prepared by one FTE program. Two research questions guided the present inquiry: First, what decisions did the participating teachers make on whether, where, and which school to teach? Second, why and how did the teachers make those decisions throughout their job search process?

Drawing on the lessons of a Chinese policy case, the present study can add to our limited understanding of teachers' job search process and career decision making between the pre- and in-service stage. This study can also contribute to the international discussion about the design and employment of policy interventions to effectively equalize quality teachers for high-need contexts.

2. Equality-oriented teacher policies

The FTE policy is a Chinese case of many international policy initiatives which aim to equalize teacher quality across schools in their respective contexts. One useful way to understand such a rich set of policies is to focus on the forms of interventions they adopt. Based on current research literature, we identify three forms of interventions, i.e., alternative hiring strategies, providing incentives, and teacher rotation.

The first set of equality-oriented teacher policies adopts alternative teacher hiring strategies in order to address the urgency of teacher shortage of hard-to-staff schools. A well-known example in this category is “Teach For America” (TFA) in the U.S. Chudgar, Chandra & Razaque (2014) reviewed the recent studies on this type of policy. Their review suggests that while such policies have alleviated the seriousness of teacher shortage in hard-to-staff contexts, contract teachers who are hired through alternative routes are often undertrained, underpaid, and inexperienced compared to their traditionally hired counterparts. Scholars thus raised concerns that this form of teacher hiring may not be sustainable and may negatively impact educational equality (Chudgar et al., 2014; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010). For instance, Vasquez Heilig & Jez's (2010) study found that more than 50% of TFA teachers left the teaching profession after two years and more than 80% left after three years.

Another set of equality-oriented teacher policies primarily rely on incentives. McEwan (1999) studied 21 developing countries' monetary incentive policies for recruiting and retaining teachers for their rural schools. He suggests that monetary incentives seem to be an effective tool for equalizing teacher quality across schools because they tend to counteract non-monetary aspects of teaching jobs in hard-to-staff schools, such as unfavorable geographic locations. On the other hand, Guarino et al. (2006) conducted a literature review and found some non-monetary incentives, such as school administrators' support as well as induction and mentoring programs, are also critical for enhancing teachers' motivations to work in hard-to-staff schools. However, there are no universal rules about what and how much monetary and/or non-monetary incentives will be effective in recruiting and retaining teachers for a particular high-need context. Therefore, the power of different incentives needs to be evaluated in relation to the specific context where they are used (Honig, 2006).

Teacher rotation is another policy intervention that is practiced by a few countries. South Korea and Japan are two nations well known for their teacher rotation systems. For instance, teachers in South Korea are hired at the city or provincial level and assigned to positions in schools in a province. Then every 5 years, they are required to move to a different school within the province. By doing so, teachers have a virtually equal probability of teaching in any given school within the province (Kang & Hong, 2008). Similarly, Japanese teachers do not select the schools in which they teach, but are assigned by their prefectural Board of Education to schools. Teachers are rotated on a regular basis, usually every 6–7 years (Kansai Society for

Educational Administration, 1999). It is believed that the forceful teacher rotation policy is an important factor that accounts for quality teachers being equally distributed across schools in Korean and Japan.

The FTE policy developed and implemented in the Chinese context is in line with the international initiatives reviewed above with some distinctive features. The general terms of the FTE policy are summarized as follows.

First of all, the FTE policy provides the participating teachers with a package of material incentives, including tuition waiver, free accommodation, and a monthly stipend for their pre-service education. The total value that each participant receives per year is about 9000¹ Chinese Yuan (or \$1385 US Dollars, using the exchange rate of 6.5). Considering that the average income of per rural resident in 2007 (i.e., the starting year of the FTE policy) was 4140² Chinese Yuan (13,786 Yuan per urban resident), the financial aid offered by the FTE policy would be attractive to many high school graduates, especially to those located in rural areas with a need for financial support for their college education.

In addition, the governments of their home provinces should guarantee each participating teacher a civil servant track teaching position after they graduate.³ In terms of their obligations, FTE participating teachers are required to serve for a period of ten years in primary or secondary schools in the provinces they come from after they graduate. Those teachers who find jobs in urban schools are obliged to teach in rural schools for two years *first*. “Should they break the contract, FTE candidates must bear the consequences of refunding all educational costs, paying a penalty, and being blacklisted in a Credit Record Archives established by the educational authorities” ((Wang & Gao, 2013 p. 68); China’s Ministry of Education, 2007).

Therefore, the FTE policy uses both monetary and employment incentives to recruit and retain participants in the profession; it uses the “contract form” in order to direct participants to target locations (home provinces); it also uses a sort of rotation system to push the participants who find jobs in urban schools to teach in rural schools for two years first. At the same time, the FTE policy is distinctive from other policies in a few significant ways. First, the FTE policy is implemented by a few selected teacher education institutions in China. Quite different from the traditionally defined “contract teachers” who are often of “lower” quality, FTE teachers are regarded as qualified and competent as they are prepared by the leading teacher education programs in the nation (Hagin, 2012).

Second, the intervention of the FTE policy ranges from teachers’ pre-service education to the first ten years of their teaching career. Unlike the aforementioned policies which primarily focus on recruiting new teachers or retaining existing ones, FTE expands its interventions backwards to the pre-service phase of educating teachers (Hagin, 2012). Third, FTE’s interventions are high-stakes. Both the “carrots” and “sticks” of the policy are crucial to participating teachers. Few other policies make teacher education free for up to four years and offer their participants teaching positions after they graduate. It is also rare to see a policy that mandates its participants to commit at least *ten* years of their lives to working in the profession with several stringent constraints and to bear serious financial and moral costs if they fail to fulfill those obligations.

A combination of these distinctive features therefore makes the FTE policy a hybrid, high-stakes and proactive case of the equality-oriented teacher policies. These features present an interesting case for the study of new teachers’ job search process in relation to external policy interventions and their embedded working contexts.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework (Fig. 1) of this study was adapted from Loeb and Reininger’s (2004) “Preferences & Constraints” model which posits that teachers face two strands of power that jointly affect their career decisions: their preferences for jobs and the constraints they face. However, if directly applying the model to FTE teachers, this study would suffer from two limitations. First, the model to some extent does not take into consideration the impacts that local labor markets may have on FTE teachers’ job search process. A growing number of studies suggest that teacher labor markets are highly localized. The social, cultural and political features of a particular local labor market (e.g., the local market’s high demands for certain type of teachers) can significantly influence teachers’ job search process and outcomes (Engel & Cannata, 2015; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2005). Second, the model tends to treat teachers’ job search process as a one-decision-for-all event. In other words, it does not specify a series of career decisions that teachers may make throughout their job search process, which has limited our understanding of the nuances behind the different decisions individual teachers make. In order to address these two possible limitations, we adapt the original model as follows.

First, we add “local teacher labor market” (the grey background in Fig. 1) to reflect the specific context in which the FTE teachers search for jobs and make their career decisions. Second, we decompose the general job search process into a series of decisions. In particular, these decisions include: Whether to teach? Where to teach? Which school to teach? The “whether” decision is concerned with a teacher’s choice to join the teaching profession or not. Both the “where” and “which school” decisions are associated with teachers’ preferences about a particular teaching context. While “where” primarily

¹ 9000 Yuan is the total value of the financial aid offered by Beijing Normal University (one of the six FTE implementing institutions) to their FTE program participants. The total includes 4800 Yuan for tuition, 600 Yuan for accommodation, and 3600 Yuan (400 Yuan/month*9) for stipend (Data source: Beijing Normal University Division of Finance, <http://cjc.bnu.edu.cn/>). The values of financial aid offered by the others FTE programs may vary slightly.

² Data source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, <http://data.stats.gov.cn/>.

³ FTE teachers should search for jobs within their home provinces first. The governments will assign teaching positions to those who cannot find teaching jobs on their own.

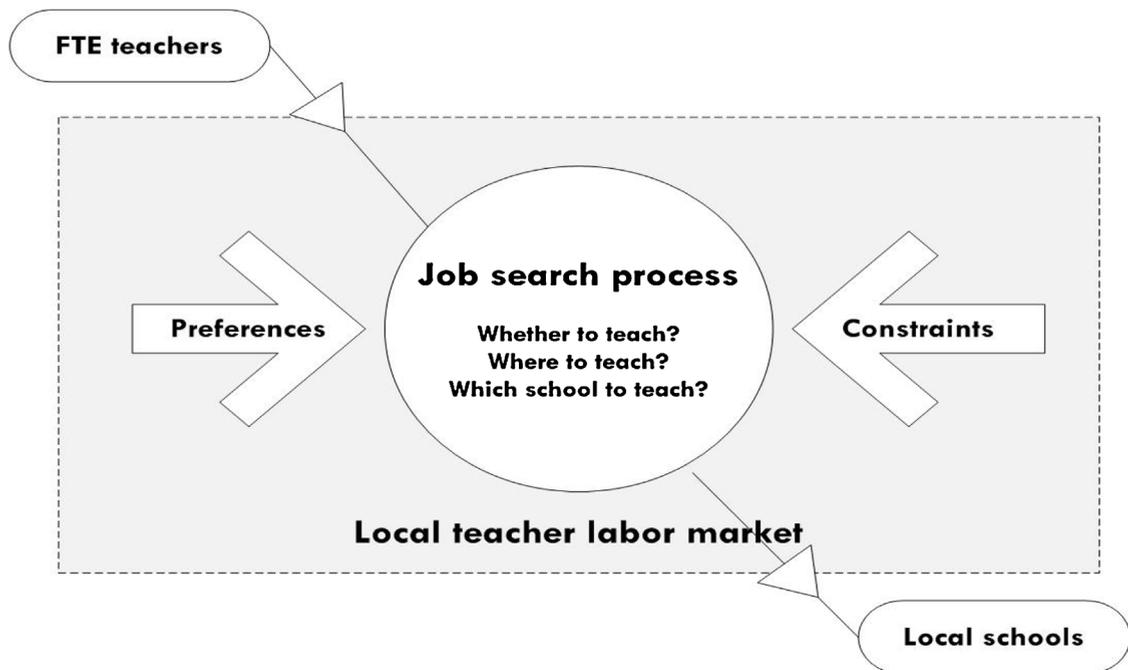


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

refers to geographic locations (e.g., schools in urban or rural areas), “which school” is more related to school-level characteristics such as educational resources, institutional support and student backgrounds.

The existing literature also shows other ways of conceptualizing teachers’ job search process. For instance, Cannata (2011) decomposed teachers’ job search process into several search practices, such as “identify job opportunities,” “gather information about schools,” and “obtain jobs.” However, we argue these job search *practices* cannot be translated into employment outcomes until the teachers make the three career decisions delineated above. Only when FTE teachers *decide to teach, decide to teach in their home provinces, and decide to teach in high-need rural schools in their home provinces for two years first*, can we claim that the FTE policy successfully achieves its intended goal of channeling quality teachers to the high-need rural schools in the underdeveloped provinces targeted by the policy.

4. Method

This study adopts a multiple case study design (Yin, 2014), which allows us to look closely into the complex job search process of fourteen FTE teachers in their situated institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

4.1. Selection of the cases

This study used criteria sampling (Patton, 2002) and selected fourteen FTE teachers as research participants. These teachers met a few criteria: a. received free teacher education in the same program—the FTE-Math program (pseudonym); b. graduated in 2011, 2012, or 2013 (the first three cohorts of FTE-Math); c. their home province is Guizhou. We chose a math program because math is a core subject for which China’s rural schools consistently lack quality teachers (Xu & Yuan, 2006). Recruiting the first three cohorts was not only because they had gone through their job search process, but it would also allow us to analyze if any similarities or variances existed in teachers’ job search process across different years. “Home province” was used as another criterion for sampling because FTE teachers are obliged to go to teach back in their home provinces. Given the theoretical framework’s emphasis on local labor markets, we chose to focus on just one province in order to sufficiently attend to its teacher labor market features and to investigate how those features impacted the participants’ job search process. Guizhou is one of the most impoverished provinces in China and the teacher quality gap between Guizhou’s rural and urban schools is persistently alarming (Tang, Wang & Zhu, 2006).

After consulting the coordinator of the FTE-Math program, seventeen teachers appeared to meet the sampling criteria. We approached the seventeen teachers in early 2014, and fourteen of them agreed to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. Research ethics were sought from the first author’s university and from the participants before the study commenced. Among the fourteen participants, nine are male and five are female. Eleven teachers came from rural areas, including seven teachers from small rural villages, three from townships, and one from a county seat; the other three teachers were from prefectural cities or the capital city of Guizhou. Eight of these teachers attended the FTE-Math program primarily because

Table 1
Participant information.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Community of origin ^a	Needed financial aid for college education?	Graduation year
Liu	M	Rural–village	Yes	2011
Yin	M	Rural–township	Yes	2011
Zhu	M	Rural–county seat	No	2011
Chen	F	Rural–village	No	2011
Li	F	Rural–village	Yes	2011
Jiang	M	Urban–prefectural city	Yes	2011
Guo	M	Rural–village	Yes	2012
Lin	M	Rural–village	No	2012
Cao	F	Urban–prefectural city	No	2012
Yang	M	Rural–village	Yes	2012
Zhang	M	Rural–township	Yes	2013
Lv	F	Rural–township	No	2013
He	F	Urban–capital city	No	2013
Dai	M	Rural–village	Yes	2013

^a China's governance system consists of five administrative divisions below the national government: province, prefecture, county, township, and village. In a province, the capital city and the prefectural cities are considered as "urban areas", while the county seats, townships, and villages are regarded as "rural areas".

they needed financial aid for their college education. Six teachers graduated from the FTE-Math program in 2011, while four graduated in both 2012 and 2013.

The researchers of this study also grew up in Guizhou and have rich experience in studying teacher education reform in China and internationally. Our familiarity with the topic and the research context can help strengthen the validity of this study (Table 1).

4.2. Data generation

Interview was the primary method of generating data for this research. The first author interviewed each teacher three times at different points during the study. From March to April 2014, the first author conducted phone or online interviews with the participants, during which he introduced to the teachers the background and purpose of the study and collected information about their demographics, motivations of attending the program, graduation years, and the schools in which they were teaching.

From May to June 2014 the first author visited the teachers in Guizhou and conducted face-to-face interviews with them. The purpose was to collect the teachers' retrospective narratives of their job search experiences. Each interview lasted for about one hour. The first author invited the teachers to talk as freely and detailed as possible about how they perceived the FTE policy, how they found their present teaching jobs, and why they chose to teach there.

One year later in July 2015, the first author visited the fourteen teachers again with the preliminary findings. The initial findings had surfaced some similar experiences in their job search process (e.g., they all skipped an important exam that non-FTE teachers had to take for getting a civil servant track teaching position in Guizhou) as well as the individual variations (e.g., they had different preferences when making career decisions). The third round of interview offered this study a good opportunity to refine the emerging themes and to dig deeper into the variations across individual teachers.

In addition to the FTE teachers, the first author interviewed the coordinator of the FTE-Math program who served as a "bridge" between the program and the local context in Guizhou. The coordinator's sharing of how she cooperated with the local government and schools and what feedback she received from local schools, administrators, and their graduates can shed light on the characteristics of the local teacher labor market in Guizhou. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first researcher for analysis. Please refer to [Appendix A](#) for the specific interview protocols for the FTE teachers and the program coordinator.

4.3. Data analysis

First, we laid out in a table the information about which schools these teachers were teaching and backward mapped what precedent career decisions they had made (whether and where to teach). Next, we open coded the interview transcripts to explore the factors that had impacted these teachers' career decisions. Several initial codes emerged from the data, such as "the draw of home," "stay with boyfriend/girlfriend," "opportunities for professional growth," "convenience of living," "the obligation of teaching for ten years," "local schools' high demands for FTE teachers," among several others.

We further used cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014) to crystallize certain factors that many FTE teachers repeatedly reported. For instance, only one teacher mentioned that "staying close to her boyfriend" was a factor that influenced her career decisions, but almost all the teachers mentioned "opportunities for professional growth" as an important factor that influenced their school choosing. Thus, we elevated "opportunities for professional growth" to be a key factor which was further examined in the following analysis.

Guided by the theoretical framework as delineated above, we then synthesized the key factors into the three main categories, i.e., preferences, constraints, and contextual factors, and analyzed how different combinations of these factors shaped the teachers' decisions on whether, where, and which school to teach respectively. For example, when deciding where to teach, the teachers' homogenous preference for working in a place close to their homes was aligned with the FTE teachers' obligation of going to teach back in their home province. Such alignment largely explained why all the teachers did not violate the FTE policy's constraint on their work location.

Finally, we used the interview data with the FTE-Math program coordinator as well as relevant research literature (e.g., Yuan & Zhang, 2017; Wang & Gao, 2013) to critically validate the interview findings.

5. Findings

5.1. Overview of the teachers' career decisions

The fourteen participating teachers in this study have fairly varied background in gender, graduation year, and teaching experience. However, despite their diverse backgrounds, they had made quite similar decisions on the three career decisions concerned in this study. Table 2 provides an overview of the teachers' career decisions. All the teachers chose to teach in schools located in their home province Guizhou right after they graduated. However, divorcing from the central goal of the FTE policy, thirteen teachers ended up teaching in schools located in several large cities (ten in the capital city Guiyang and three in prefectural cities) and only one teacher chose to teach in a rural school (in a county seat). According to the FTE policy, the thirteen teachers who were employed by urban schools should have gone to teach in rural schools for two years first. However, this critical provision for channeling quality teachers to high-need rural schools had not been effectively implemented at least for the thirteen teachers reported in the study.

In terms of which school to teach, the majority of the participants chose high-performing urban high schools. In 2013, there were 699 high schools in Guizhou (Guizhou Department of Education, 2014). The provincial government recognized 88 (or about 13%) of them as three-tiered exemplary high schools based on their overall educational quality (Guizhou Department of Education, 2012). Twelve teachers in this study ended up teaching in some of these selective high schools. Only two teachers went to teach in non-exemplary schools. As for school level, almost all the teachers chose high schools to teach except for just one teacher.

5.2. Why and how did the teachers make their career decisions?

What were the rationales behind these teachers' career decisions? The fourteen teachers' retrospective narratives of their job search process provided valuable insights into this question.

5.2.1. Deciding "whether to teach"

In general, teachers' personal motivations for teaching and the high costs of breaking the FTE contract jointly made all the fourteen teachers choose to enter and stay in the teaching profession. Half of them planned to be a teacher before joining the FTE-Math program and their motivations for teaching were reinforced throughout their pre-service education. For instance, Teacher Cao said:

I wanted to be a teacher since I was little. That's why I applied for the FTE-Math program. Even if the education were not free, I would still apply for it simply because it's one of the best teacher education programs (in China). Our professors were excellent. I was inspired by their strong commitment to improving China's education. In the past, I just saw teaching as a job I liked. But, my professors made me to view teaching as a collective enterprise of all educators. I wanted to contribute my efforts to this enterprise after I graduated, even if my contribution would be a little.

The six other teachers in this category expressed similar opinions with Cao. When they started their job search, they almost never thought of looking for a non-teaching job.

As for the seven other teachers, they claimed they had limited to no motivation for being a teacher before they participated in the program. The primary reason for them joining the program was the benefits associated with being an FTE teacher. Nevertheless, the FTE-Math program successfully developed their sense of commitment towards the teaching profession. Yin was a typical teacher in this category. He planned to be a technician when he was in high school. However, his family was not able to fund his college education. After he knew the FTE-Math program, he decided to apply for it in order *not* to place financial burden on his parents' shoulders. Yin said he was good at mathematics in high school, and he did not resist being a teacher, though teaching was not his ideal job then. After studying in the FTE-Math program for four years, he gradually developed motivations in being a teacher other than a technician because he thought teachers' work is to interact with human beings rather than machines, which was more interesting to him.

Teacher Liu was the only teacher who regretted his decision of applying for the FTE-Math program upon graduation. Liu said:

To be honest, I felt regretful about applying for the FTE-Math program. You know, I was only 18 years old then. I was too young to know what specific job that I would like and fit. I joined the program mainly because I needed financial aid for my college education and I liked math. However, soon after I started my study in the program, I figured out that teaching was not

Table 2
The participants' career decisions.

Name	Whether to teach?	Where to teach?			Which school to teach?	
		Province	Area	2-year rural teaching completed? ^a	School's academic rank ^b	Grade level ^c
Liu	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	10
Yin	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	12
Zhu	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 1%	10
Chen	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	11
Li	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	11
Jiang	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–prefectural city	No	Top 8%	12
Guo	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–prefectural city	No	Top 8%	11
Lin	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	N/A	7
Cao	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	–	10
Yang	Yes	Guizhou	Rural–county seat	N/A	Top 13%	10
Zhang	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–prefectural city	No	Top 8%	10
Lv	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	10
He	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 8%	10
Dai	Yes	Guizhou	Urban–capital city	No	Top 1%	10

^a This column indicates the teachers' status of fulfilling their obligation of teaching in rural schools for 2-year first, which is mandated by the FTE policy for teachers who are employed by urban schools. "No" means the teacher had not fulfilled this obligation by 2014. "N/A" means this status does not apply to the teacher.

^b The ranks were for high schools only. The authors calculated the ranks based on a list of the three-tiered exemplary high schools issued by the provincial government of Guizhou (Guizhou Department of Education, 2012). "N/A" means does not apply, and "–" means the data was not available.

^c These grade levels were the ones the teachers teaching in 2014 when the first two rounds of interview data were generated. In China, elementary education is usually from grade 1–6, middle school is from grade 7–9, and high school is from grade 10–12.

something I liked. I did think of breaking the contract, but I was not able to afford the refund and the penalty fee. Then, like many other cohort-mates in our program, I looked for teaching jobs and started to work. For now, I cannot say I hate teaching, but to me teaching is just a job for me to make a living.

While all the teachers did choose to enter the teaching profession, how long did they plan to stay and why? Teacher Dai said, "Once I decided to apply for the FTE-Math program, I knew I would stay in the teaching profession for a long time. It is unlikely that I would change my profession after ten years. You know ten years are not a short period of time, and I don't know what other jobs I would be able to do after teaching for ten years." Similarly, Teacher Yang said, "My career path would be 'fixed' after teaching for ten years." Teacher Jiang's feeling on the 10-year teaching obligation was even philosophical, "People always have many choices to make when he is standing before an intersection in his life, but he can pick only one road to go down. The FTE-Math program was just one of the roads I chose a couple years ago, and now I am good with that choice." Looking across these thoughts, it seemed that the 10-year teaching obligation had been effectively retaining these teachers in the profession so far.

5.2.2. Deciding "where to teach"

The FTE policy's constraint on job location and the teachers' natural preference for "home" had successfully directed all the fourteen teachers back to their home province Guizhou. Nevertheless, the teachers' preference for "urbanicity" along with the ineffective implementation of the "2-year teaching in rural school" provision jointly resulted in the teachers' stay in well-developed urban areas.

The draw of home played a powerful role in the teachers' decision on where to teach. Many teachers said they did want to go to work back in their home province. Teacher Jiang's job search experience was a telling example. He grew up in Bijie, a prefectural city in western Guizhou. He said as the only child in his family, he really wanted to live close to his parents after graduation. So when he was looking for jobs, he directly targeted the high school he graduated. As he wished, he received an offer from his alma mater. This was the only job application he submitted and also the only offer he received and accepted. He was happy with the result.

Similarly, Teacher He applied for six schools, and all of them were located in her hometown Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou. The choice she needed to make was not about which place to work but about how many bus stops were between the school and her home. She felt disappointed when the school located within walking distance from her home rejected her application, but her experience nonetheless revealed the powerful role home and family played in shaping these teachers' decision on where to teach.

Some other teachers did want to teach outside of their home provinces, but the financial and moral consequences of breaking the contract discouraged this idea. For example, Teacher Zhang said:

I did think of going to teach in the first-tier cities like Beijing after I graduated. However, the penalty fee for breaking the contract is about 10,000 Yuan, not including the refund for the money I received for my college education. My parents are peasants and their incomes are low. My family would not be able to afford that. Also, I would have a stain on my credit profile and it would be following me for the rest of my life. You know, the credit profile is very important for finding a job in this society. So I finally gave up this idea.

After the teachers had decided to go to work back in their home province, the living condition of the place where a school was located was the next important factor many teachers considered. In general, the FTE teachers thought urban areas had more convenient transportation, greater opportunities for doing extra work, and better educational resources for their kids than rural areas did. Therefore, most of the teachers seemed to have a similar ranking of the locations they preferred to work from the most to the least: the capital city Guiyang, several prefectural cities, and lastly, rural areas. The teachers' strong preference for urban areas was reflected in Teacher Yin's comparison of his hometown (a township in a rural area) and the capital city Guiyang. Yin said:

I come from a small township in Zunyi (a prefecture in northern Guizhou). I know the differences between the life in my hometown and in Guiyang. I chose to teach here (in Guiyang) other than going back to my hometown because there are more opportunities for part-time teaching jobs here, so I can earn extra money over weekends. You know teacher's salary is not very good. But it is not just about money, but more about the quality and style of life, and I like living in big cities. For sure, I believe my kids can receive better education in Guiyang than in my hometown in the future.

The teachers' individual choices for working in a "better" place were understandable and also anticipated by the FTE policymakers. That is why the policy has the "2-year teaching in rural schools" provision in order to counteract the teachers' preference for urbanicity. However, when it comes to the teachers in this study, this provision seemed to have been barely implemented. All the teachers except Teacher Yang were supposed to fulfill this obligation because they started their teaching careers in urban schools. However, only Teacher Guo was asked by his present school to fulfill this obligation. He started working in a rural community in his prefecture since the beginning of 2015. He would stay there until the middle of 2016. However, his job responsibilities in that rural community were not teaching but assisting the village head on several civil engineering projects.

5.2.3. Deciding "which school to teach"

In selecting a school for teaching, most teachers prioritized high schools with rich professional learning opportunities and excellent academic performance. Because of the unequal distribution of educational resources between urban and rural schools, the schools that the teachers preferred were mainly clustered in urban areas. Therefore, the teachers' decisions on where to teach and which school to teach were highly correlated. In addition, the local teacher labor market's high demands for FTE teachers and several teacher hiring policies which were favorable to FTE teachers jointly skewed these teachers' employment outcomes towards high-performing high schools in urban areas.

The teachers attached great importance to their future development when they were choosing a school. They thought the first few years were critical for a novice teacher's professional development, and urban schools were likely to provide more opportunities for their professional growth. Teacher Yin's experiences well illustrated the teachers' preference for schools with rich resources for developing teachers. He received an offer from School A, one of the best high schools in the prefecture he grew up and he had signed an initial labor contract with that school. However, after that he was not satisfied with the result, since he thought a teaching job in the capital city Guiyang would be better. Thus, he continued the job search with a secured offer in his pocket. A few weeks later he received another offer from School B in the capital city Guiyang, and then he had a really difficult time in deciding which school to choose. He said he finally chose School B primarily because of what School B's principal said to him as follows:

The principal said to me over the phone, "Compared to many schools outside of Guiyang, our school has more opportunities for developing teachers within and outside the school. We send teachers to selective normal universities for in-service professional development. Our teachers have many opportunities to exchange their teaching experiences with teachers from many of our cooperating schools. Well, I can say it is easy to transfer from a school in Guiyang to a school outside, but the reverse transfer is much more difficult."

Apart from their personal preferences, the local labor market in Guizhou played a mediating role in shaping their employment outcomes as well. First of all, there was a great demand in local schools for FTE teachers. The teacher labor markets in underdeveloped provinces such as Guizhou scarcely had job applicants from the leading normal universities for many years before the FTE policy was implemented. Thus, even the best schools in Guizhou wanted to recruit FTE teachers. "When I was leading our students to their home province for student teaching, many school principals told me that they hadn't seen students from our university applying for their schools for many years, and they really wanted to have them", said by Professor Zhu, the coordinator of the FTE-Math program.

Many teachers' job search experiences confirmed what Professor Zhu said. For instance, Teacher Zhang recalled, "I was interviewed by my current school in Beijing. The principal led a recruitment team to our university to actively hire FTE teachers. Many schools proactively relocated their recruitment sites from their own schools to our university, hoping to be able to hire FTE teachers".

Also, there were a set of local teacher recruitment policies which had significantly privileged FTE teachers. All the FTE teachers reported that they skipped an examination that non-FTE applicants must take during the job application process. For instance, Teacher Lv said, "Oh, we didn't have to take that exam. The recruitment policy definitely privileged us". Every FTE teacher in this study confirmed this privilege that the local teacher recruitment policy granted them.

Moreover, as a benefit of participating in FTE, these teachers were guaranteed a civil service track teaching position. Teachers in China are usually hired into two tracks: fixed-term track and civil servant track. Civil servant track teachers are

similar to tenure-track teachers in other contexts (e.g., the U.S.) with better pay and benefits than their fixed-term track counterparts. For local schools, hiring a civil servant track teacher would cost much more than hiring a fixed-term track teacher. The competitions for civil servant track teaching positions are fierce in almost every province in China today. However, the national and provincial governments have jointly created a special fund to support the hiring of FTE teachers in order to make sure every FTE teacher can have a civil servant track teaching position (China's Ministry of Education, 2011; Guizhou Department of Education, 2011). In other words, FTE teachers can bring additional funding to the schools which hire them. This seems another reason why almost every local school intended to hire FTE teachers.

6. Discussion and implications

The findings reported above suggest that a combination of generous benefits and a long term teaching obligation seems to be a powerful policy intervention in motivating teacher candidates to enter and stay in the teaching profession. This finding speaks to the studies of Zhou (2010), Guarino et al. (2006) and McEwan (1999) which conclude that generous incentives are effective in recruiting and retaining teachers. Six of the participating teachers in this study had no apparent preference for being a teacher before they joined the FTE-Math program, but they were attracted by the generous benefits offered by the FTE policy. Most of them developed their commitment to the teaching profession through their pre-service education stage and finally chose to become a teacher.

However, Teacher Liu's persistent resistance to his teaching job surfaced a limitation of such stringent policy intervention: "locking" the teachers with low intrinsic motivations in the teaching force. A set of literature suggests that teacher motivation is positively associated with teachers' professional engagement and development as well as their teaching effectiveness (Yuan & Lee, 2014; Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014). Keeping such teachers in the teaching force would take the risk of compromising rather than enhancing educational quality. Thus, FTE programs may consider offering the participants a chance to revisit their decisions and exit the programs at the early stage of their professional learning with appropriate guidance and monitoring from teacher educators and educational administrators.

In addition, many studies on alternative teacher hiring policies conclude that contract teachers tend to suffer from high attrition rates (e.g., Chudgar et al., 2014; Vasquez Helig & Jez, 2010). In contrast, none of the FTE teachers in the study had left the profession so far and almost all of them stated that they would fulfill their 10-year teaching commitment and stay in the profession thereafter. FTE's demands for participating teachers to teach for a long term thus played an important role in retaining them in the profession.

Second, this study also indicates that when the work location targeted by an equality-oriented teacher policy is aligned with teachers' intrinsic preference, the participants are more likely to comply with the policy. Boyd et al. (2005) found that teachers prefer to work in a place approximate to their homes. The fourteen teachers' decisions on where to teach partially confirmed this finding. The teachers demonstrated their preference for returning home and thus presented limited to no resistance to their obligation of working in their home province. However, it is important to examine the notion of "home" from the perspectives of the teachers. Instead of returning to their true homes which may be located in rural areas, they developed a new concept of "home" referring to the prosperous urban cities in their provinces, where they can enjoy rich social resources and facilities while still remain close to their family with familiar food, culture, and customs.

In other words, when the teachers tried to decide which specific area within their home province to teach, they attached more importance to the overall living condition than its distance to their homes (e.g., Luo & Mkandawire, 2015). The FTE policy intends to use the "2-year teaching in rural school" provision to counteract teachers' intrinsic preference for "urbanicity", but due to the ineffective implementation, almost all the teachers successfully circumvented this constraint and finally knocked open the doors of the schools located in several well-developed large cities. It is notable that Teacher Guo, the only teacher who was asked by their urban school to fulfill the FTE commitment to teach in a rural school, ended up working in a rural community for a year and a half and his work was irrelevant to teaching during that time.

The FTE policy vaguely outlines the responsibilities that each of the implementing parties ought to undertake so as to allow the provincial governments to interpret and carry out the policies according to their local needs and capacities. Such vagueness reserves room for some provincial governments to selectively implement the FTE policy (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Based on the experiences of the teachers reported in this study, the provincial government of Guizhou did not require the FTE teachers to fulfill their obligation of 2-year rural school teaching. This can be attributed to two reasons. First, in Guizhou and many other provinces in China, it is the county-level governments that are mainly responsible for funding and managing rural schools (Li, Liu & An, 2010). However, the majority of the FTE teachers in this study were employed by urban schools which were separately funded and managed by the prefectural or capital city governments. As suggested by the successful teacher rotation systems in South Korea and Japan, it is necessary for the provincial government to build up necessary inter-governmental collaborations to carry out the "2-year rural school teaching" provision (Kang & Hong, 2008; Kansai Society for Educational Administration, 1999), but unfortunately it was not the case in this study. In addition, as reported above, even the best schools in Guizhou wanted to recruit FTE teachers and it was unlikely that they would voluntarily send them to rural schools for two years for the sake of their own interests. Thus, in order to effectively implement the "2-year rural school teaching" provision, the provincial government of Guizhou needs to more actively take the lead to facilitate the collaborations among the different government bodies at various levels to develop a collective implementing scheme which specifies their respective duties related to the FTE teachers' work, such as salary, performance evaluation, professional development, and promotion.

Third, this study implies that developing teachers' commitment to educational equity and social justice in their pre-service education should be an indispensable component of a policy aimed to channel teachers to high-need contexts (Yuan & Lee, 2015). The fourteen teachers' highly homogenous choice of high-performing urban schools during their job search process questioned FTE programs' job in developing the pre-service FTE teachers' such dispositions (Wang & Gao, 2013). In order to develop FTE teachers' preference for teaching in high-need rural schools, like what Wang & Gao (2013) suggested, the FTE programs can include social equity and justice as essential components of their curricula.

Fourth, this study also indicates that the local context can significantly influence the policy outcomes of an equality-oriented teacher policy, which is resonated by Honig's (2006) argument that local context matters in policy implementation. The study surfaced two context-specific factors (i.e., high demands for FTE teachers and the hiring policies that privileged FTE teachers) that contributed to the teachers' entry in high-performing urban schools. In order to address the local schools' high demands for FTE teachers, the FTE policy may need to expand the FTE programs from the six leading normal universities to other normal universities at provincial or even local levels. Although the teacher quality gap between rural and urban schools may not be quickly narrowed by supplying more FTE teachers to the local labor market, expanding the population of FTE teachers should be able to improve the overall teacher quality of a province. The high quality FTE teachers may eventually permeate into the high-need rural schools when the teaching positions in high-performing urban schools are saturated.

Last but not least, the local government can consider treating FTE teachers and non-FTE teachers equally in teacher hiring practices. However, the Chinese national government may concern that the large amount of resources already invested in the FTE teachers would be wasted if some FTE teachers could not find a teaching job by themselves. If that situation occurs, the government should reconsider if these teachers are qualified enough for the teaching profession. If the government still assigns these teachers to high-need rural schools, it might perpetuate rather than interrupt the inequality in teacher quality between rural and urban schools. Alternative career routes should be provided for such teachers, such as serving in other governmental positions they may fit better or refunding a portion of the FTE financial aids on a mutual agreement between the teacher and the government.

7. Conclusion

Teacher attrition and unequal teacher quality distribution are alarming issues facing many countries today. Equality-oriented teacher policies are important tools for addressing these issues and enhancing educational fairness and quality for disadvantaged students and schools. The present study sailed out with the goal of understanding the emerging failure of a Chinese case of the equality-oriented teacher policies—the FTE policy. From a job search perspective, this study identified the specific factors related to the teachers, the FTE policy, and the local context that were consequential to the participating teachers' job search process. The study also revealed how these factors played out in the teachers' decision making on whether, where, and which schools to teach. This study not only offers an interpretation of the emerging failure of the FTE policy from a job search perspective, but also generates implications on how to design and implement equality-oriented teacher policies to enhance educational fairness and quality.

The findings of this study are limited in a few ways. First, the primary data of this research was drawn from a small number of FTE teachers from just one FTE program. Therefore, the findings about the skewed distribution of the teachers' employment outcomes might not represent that of all FTE teachers, although it did echo the findings of prior studies (Luo & Mkandawire, 2015; Zhou, 2010). Second, the factors identified as being consequential to the FTE teachers' job search process and the different roles they played in the teachers' decision making might be varying if teachers from different FTE programs, cohort years, or home provinces were investigated.

For future studies, a large-scale quantitative study is needed to investigate the career trajectories of all FTE teachers or a representative sample in order to get a fuller picture of the FTE teachers' fulfillment of their obligations. In order to obtain a more complete understanding of the FTE teachers' job search process, future studies can also incorporate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders who are involved in the process of employing and retaining FTE teachers, such as local governmental officials, school principals, among several others.

In conclusion, we argue that equality-oriented teacher policies are more likely to succeed in equalizing students' access to quality teachers, if they offer generous benefits to participating teachers, tightly ties teachers' obligation to working in high-need schools, and build up necessary administrative arrangements so as to secure faithful implementation on the ground. If any of the aforementioned components is missing, it is unlikely that the teachers will choose to teach in high-need schools voluntarily and whole-heartedly when they come to make their career choices.

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Appendix A.

Interview Questions for the FTE Teachers

Background

- Which school, subject and grade are you teaching right now?
- How do you like your teaching in this school?
- Why did you choose to attend the FTE-Math program?
- How were you admitted? Can you share the details about the admission procedures you experienced?

Job search process

- How did you find this job?
- Why did you choose to be a teacher? Have you considered choosing some other professions? What do you think of the 10-year teaching obligation?
- Have you considered going to work in other provinces? Why yes or no?
- How many schools did you apply? How many schools interviewed you? Which schools gave you offer? Why did you choose to work in this particular school?
- When you were looking for jobs, what did you value the most (e.g., salary, geographic location, school leadership, student background)? And why?
- Did you feel any constraints on your job search and decision making? If yes, what were they?

The “2-year rural teaching” obligation

(Note: for those who were employed by urban schools only)

- According to the FTE policy, you should have taught in a rural school for 2 years first. Have you fulfilled that obligation already?
- If yes, which school did you go and how was that experience? If no, why didn't you go? Do you plan to teach in rural schools in the future? Why yes or no?

Interview Questions for the FTE-Math Program Coordinator

- What do the local governments and schools think of the graduates of your program? Do they want to hire more graduates from your program in the future?
- Do you have any collaboration with local governments and schools for helping your graduates find a job? If yes, what are they?
- Have you received any feedback from your graduates about their job hunting experiences? Is it generally easy or difficult? What stories did your graduates share with you about their job search and current teaching?

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