

## A systematic review of the changes, challenges, and implications of China's teacher education policies (2012 to 2023)

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### ABSTRACT

Although China's teacher education policies have achieved significant progress in improving teacher quality, they have also undergone substantial changes and encountered new challenges. It is necessary to systematically analyze policies from the past decade to achieve a prudent balance between the immediacy and foresight of policymaking. This systematic analysis paper examines China's teacher education policies from 2012 to 2023, reviewing relevant policy documents from authoritative sources. The study reveals a strategic shift towards fostering comprehensive and innovative teacher talent, promoting professional development, and addressing urban-rural education disparities. Emphasis is placed on strengthening professional ethics and creating a societal atmosphere of respect for teachers. However, challenges arise, including the "de-normalization" of teacher education in higher education institutions, regional disparities in teacher resources, and issues in in-service teacher education. These findings have profound implications for the future of teacher education policies, both within China and globally. They underscore the need for ongoing policy review and adaptation, the importance of balance between research and teaching in teacher education programs, and the need for a more integrated and streamlined approach to in-service teacher education and professional development. The study provides insights for policy development in the field of teacher education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

China's teacher education policies, orchestrated by the Ministry of Education, aim to optimize the educational ecosystem and elevate teaching efficacy, thereby promoting equitable and holistic educational progress [1]. Earlier policies focused on expanding teacher supply and political alignment. The 1985 Teacher Law established fundamental regulations, and the 1993 Teacher Law further recognized teaching as a profession [2]. Policies in the 1990s to early 2000s stressed quantity by expanding teacher production through open enrolment and short-cycle programs [3]. The 2000s to 2010s saw policies improve teacher training quality [3]. The 2007 Teacher Law Amendment required all teachers to obtain qualifications through degree programs [1]. This shift from short-term to degree-based preparation reflected aims to improve

teacher quality over quantity. In recent years, China's teacher education policies have focused extensively on elevating teacher quality through multiple avenues. The Chinese Government, in its efforts to elevate the overall quality of the teacher workforce, has advocated incorporating teacher education courses into its curricula system through its policy for higher education institutions to incorporate teacher education majors into their curricula. Additionally, it has vigorously implemented a teacher-student internship system at the policy level, focusing particularly on nurturing comprehensive and innovative teacher talent [4], [5]. In parallel, seeking to mitigate the impact of financial constraints on teacher education, the government has increased education subsidies and salary levels, thereby attracting outstanding talents to the education profession through various preferential policies [6], [7]. Meanwhile, the Chinese Government also has paid close attention to professional development for teachers, formulating a series of policies to promote teacher training, advancement, and mobility [8]–[11]. Teacher professional development has been promoted through the offering of overseas training [12], the use of distance education platforms, and the provision of resources for autonomous learning [13]. The revitalization of the evaluation system has galvanized the professional advancement potential of primary and secondary school educators, thereby infusing renewed dynamism into their career progression [14]–[16]. Moreover, measures such as the rotational teaching system [17], [18] and the policy of County Management and School Recruitment [19], [20] have refined teacher resource allocation, promoted balanced urban and rural educational development, and effectively stimulated the mobility of teaching resources. In terms of strengthening the professional ethics and political quality (in ideological education) of teachers, the Chinese government has placed high regard on teacher ethics demeanors, and political awareness. It has been characterized by the introduction of a series of laws, regulations, and systemic rules designed to underscore the ethical tenets of the teaching profession [21]–[24]. Meanwhile, by commending model teachers [25] and hosting teacher ethics education activities [26], [27], a societal atmosphere exalting respect for teachers and the value of education has been promoted.

Over the past decade, China's educational landscape has undergone significant transformation driven by a series of policy reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of teacher education. These reforms are pivotal as they directly influence the capabilities of teachers [28], who are fundamental to the achievement of educational goals in a rapidly evolving socio-economic environment [29]. While these policy initiatives are designed to elevate teaching standards and adapt educational practices to modern demands, their implementation often encounters multifaceted challenges [1], [30], [31]. Research on Chinese teacher education policy has predominantly concentrated on specific policies, lacking a comprehensive synthesis that amalgamates diverse findings into a cohesive analysis. Studies have delved into various aspects such as the construction of a highly qualified teaching force [32], rural teacher development policies [33], challenges and strategies of education policy implementation for teacher education sustainability [31], inclusive education policies and their shortcomings [34], and efforts to address educational regional inequalities through reforms in education resources and teacher training [35]. While these individual studies provide valuable insights, there is a need for a more integrated approach that synthesizes policy documents to offer a holistic understanding of China's teacher education policies and their impact on the overall education system.

The study has pointed out that the systematic review helps identify, synthesize, and critique existing evidence to inform research, practice, and policy [36]. Systematic review aims to minimize bias through explicit methods, ensuring the reliability of findings for informed decision-making [37]. Additionally, such reviews aid in developing an overarching abstraction of the evidence, guiding future research directions and summarizing policy implications [38]. Therefore, conducting a systematic review is imperative [39], [40] of the past decade's teacher education policies, offering insights into their adaptability and their congruence with contemporary and prospective educational goals [41]. Such an approach demands a critical analysis of existing policies to uncover and rectify any deficiencies or unintended repercussions [42], while proactively preparing for imminent challenges and seizing forthcoming opportunities. This dual focus ensures that systematic policy review is both reflective of past experiences and forward-looking, thereby fostering an educational environment that is resilient and conducive to continual improvement.

The substantial policy changes and challenges faced by China's teacher education policies over the past decade necessitate a systematic review to gain insights for future policy formulation that is adaptive and effective. This review paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the specific changes in China's teacher education policy during this period. Furthermore, it seeks to explore the challenges encountered in the implementation of these policies and their implications for teaching practices and theoretical discourse in teacher education. Therefore, the research questions are: i) what are the specific changes in China's teacher education policy in the past decade? And ii) what are the challenges faced by the implementation of these policies?

The successful fulfilment of these objectives holds the potential to coax an insightful dialogue regarding the future trajectory of China's teacher education policy. It supports the policy's adaptive metamorphosis in responding to arising trends and quandaries. Notably, the amalgamation of this information

could serve as a scaffolding for tailoring highly practical and dynamic policy design. Further, these findings could fine-tune the practice of pedagogy, and invigorate further theoretical discourse in the realm of teacher education. It proffers a clarion call for thorough introspection and reflection upon the construction of decisive, efficient policies in the sphere of education, striking a careful balance between immediacy and foresight.

## 2. METHOD

The study utilized a systematic review methodology to synthesize and evaluate Chinese national teacher education policies from the past decade (2012 to 2023) because the systematic approach would help objectively synthesize the complex evidence base to identify salient policy developments, persistent challenges, and implications for teacher education in China [43], [44]. Following systematic review principles [45], the research involved a comprehensive search of education policy databases to identify all relevant national policies on teacher education. Extracted policies underwent critical appraisal to assess their rigor, transparency, and potential for bias. A qualitative synthesis identified key policy objectives, reforms, and themes over the past decade, as well as changes compared to earlier policies. Quantitative meta-analysis helped assess the magnitude and statistical significance of policy impacts based on available empirical studies.

### 2.1. Sampling and data collection

The systematic review focused on national-level teacher education policies in China from 2012 to 2023. To ensure comprehensive coverage of the national policy landscape, searches targeted two authoritative governmental databases: the Ministry of Education's database and the Central Government's database. These databases were selected to capture all relevant policies issued by the main national governing bodies responsible for China's teacher education reforms. In the two databases, the keywords searched included "teacher education", "teacher training", "teacher professional development", and "teacher evaluation". Boolean operators like AND and OR were used to combine multiple keywords in the search. After the search, the retrieved documents were screened based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine the final set of national policy documents for analysis.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for screening the retrieved policy documents were the following three points: i) national-level education policy documents issued between 2012-2023; ii) policies closely related to teacher education, training, evaluation, or professional development; iii) policy documents are available in full text. The exclusion criteria for screening the retrieved policy documents were the following these points: i) documents whose publication date is outside the target timeframe (2012-2023); ii) policy documents are lacking in specificity for teacher development; iii) policy documents are narrowly local or provincial policies; iv) documents is without substantial policy content; v) inaccessible policies lacking full text; vi) duplicate versions of the same policy. By systematically searching with relevant keywords in authoritative national databases and filtering results using pre-defined inclusion or exclusion criteria, the most pertinent and informative policies could be identified to critically analyze major national teacher education policy changes in China during 2012 to 2023. Following the application of our designated method, we identified a total of 658 policy documents. From this initial pool, 367 policy documents were subsequently screened out based on our exclusion criteria. Consequently, 45 documents ultimately met the inclusion criteria and were selected for further analysis. The specific stages of the system selection process and the number of documents available at each stage are depicted in Figure 1.

### 2.3. Analysis

The structured critical analysis process aimed to rigorously assess the documents to identify changes, and challenges emerging from the policy documents, and to extrapolate their potential implications on the teacher education system from 2012 to 2023. In this process, we established themes and categories for descriptive data analysis. We followed the guidelines of Srivastava and Thomson [46] to analyze the policy documents and summarized the manuscripts of the policy texts. Table 1 presents a summary of the reviewed policy text manuscripts. It provides the following detailed information about the summary of policy text manuscripts. This information includes: i) the title of the policy; ii) the year the policy was issued; iii) the main objectives of the policy; iv) the significance of the policy.

Table 1. A summary of policy documents reviewed manuscript

Reviewed document	Policy significance	Policy objectives
[47]	The policy addressed the challenges facing the teaching profession, and aimed to address these challenges through specific measures.	Strengthening the construction of the teaching staff, enhancing the attractiveness of rural teachers' careers.
[48]	Promoting the reform of teacher education, a new teacher training system was launched.	Deepening the reform of teacher education, promoting the connotative development of teacher education.
[49]–[51]	Promoting the professional development of the participating teachers.	Improving the professional level of teachers in the central and western regions and promoting educational equity.
[52]	Strictly enforcing teacher professional admissions and ensuring the quality of the teaching staff.	Establishing a national teacher qualification examination system.
[53]	Ensuring that teachers have corresponding professional ethics, professional levels, and work performance.	Establishing a national teacher regular registration system.
[11]	Comprehensively improving the quality of teacher training.	The goal was to cultivate a group of outstanding teachers and the ability to adapt to and lead the reform of primary and secondary education and teaching.
[54]–[56]	Promoting the professional development of rural teachers.	Cultivating local teacher teams in rural areas, and improving the professional skills of rural teachers.
[57]	Improving the treatment and status of rural teachers.	Attracting more outstanding talents to join the cause of rural education, and promoting the development of rural education.
[58]	Increasing the motivation of primary and secondary school teachers and improving the quality of primary and secondary education.	Establishing a unified primary and secondary school teacher professional title (position) system.
[59]	Promoting the training of rural teachers in all regions and promoting the development of rural education.	Improving the educational and teaching abilities of rural teachers.
[60]	Through specifications, ensuring the continuous improvement of the teaching quality of teacher training majors.	Cultivating a team of high-quality professional innovative teachers who are satisfied with the party and the people.
[61]	Promoting educational equity, and strengthening educational reform.	Enhancing the ethical foundations of teachers and boosting their overall quality.
[8]	Promoting the reform of primary and secondary school teacher education in China.	Cultivating a group of high-quality, professional, and innovative primary and secondary school teachers.
[62]	Strengthening the construction of teacher education staff.	Revitalizing teacher education and cultivating more outstanding teachers.
[4]	Improving the overall quality of teachers in the new era.	After approximately five years of concerted effort, the teacher training system should be fundamentally sound.
[22]	Improving university teachers' professional ethics.	Standardizing the professional behavior of teachers in universities, clarifying the bottom line of teacher ethics.
[23]	Improving primary and secondary school teachers' professional ethics.	Standardizing the professional behavior of teachers in primary and secondary schools, clarifying the bottom line of teacher ethics.
[24]	Improving kindergarten teachers' professional ethics.	Standardizing the professional behavior of teachers in kindergartens, clarifying the bottom line of teacher ethics.
[63]	The plan bolstered the digitized management of in-service teacher training.	Taking full advantage of emerging technologies to stimulate the construction and utilization of the teacher education digitization teaching service platform.
[64]–[66]	Promoting the professional development of teachers.	Serving the overall situation of targeted poverty alleviation through education in China.
[67]	Promoting the innovative development of information technology integrated with education and teaching.	Improving the information technology application capabilities of teachers in primary and secondary schools across the country.
[68]	Improving teachers' professional ethics and their social and professional status.	Promoting the implementation of the task of building teachers' ethics and ethics.
[69]	Putting the construction of China's rural teachers' team in an educational strategic position of priority development.	Improving the status and benefits of rural teachers, attracting more outstanding talents to join rural education.
[70]	Promoting the reform of educational evaluation.	Establishing an education system that serves lifelong learning.
[26]	Guiding teachers to strengthen their ideals and beliefs, cultivate patriotism, and uphold moral ethics.	Strengthening the construction of teachers' ethics, improving teachers' ideological and political quality and professional ethics.
[10]	Providing policy guidance and specific measures.	Improving the ideological and political quality of teachers.
[9]	Improving the teacher education system with Chinese characteristics.	Helping graduate students from the "National Excellent Plan" grow into leading talents in basic education.

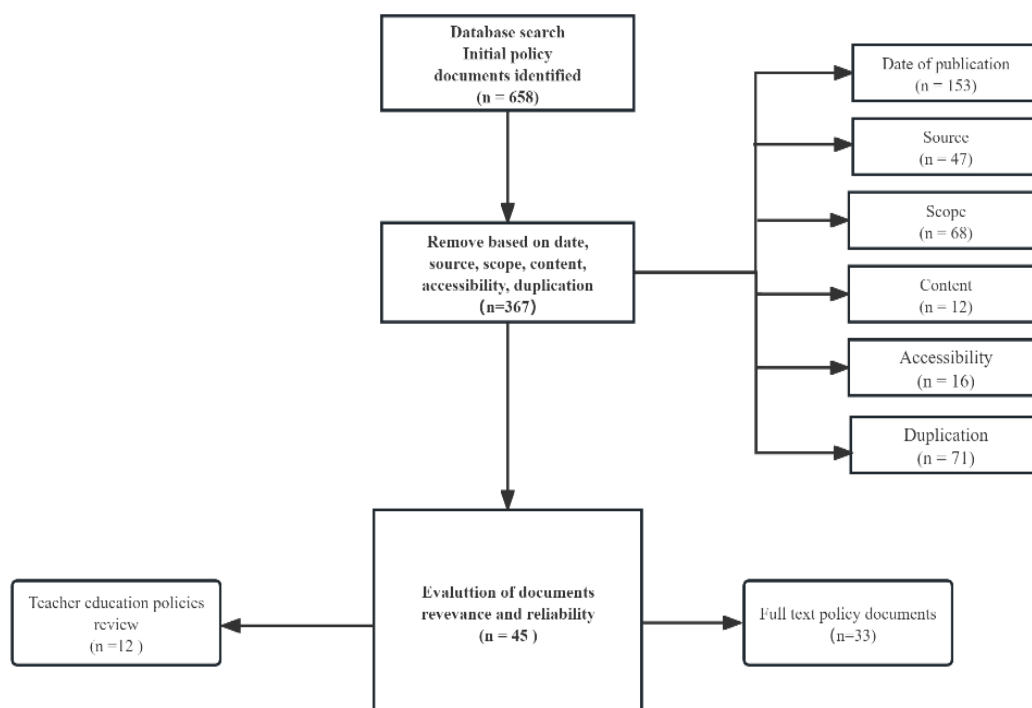


Figure 1. Flowchart of the proposed search policy documents

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the studied documents and summarizing the key policy documents, we then analyzed the contents of the education policies [71] and classified them into four categories: i) Teacher education development and reform; ii) Pre-service teacher education; iii) In-service teacher education; iv) Rural teacher education. In the following subsections, we present the results of our policy content analysis in Tables 2 to 5. We were able to infer the changes in China's teacher education policy over the past decade from these results. Through the process of literature review and integration of policy document information, the research findings included the changes, challenges, and implications of China's teacher education policy.

#### 3.1. The changes in China's teacher education policies from 2012 to 2023

##### 3.1.1. Teacher education development and reform

Based on the content analysis of policies related to teacher education development and reform, we infer the changes in China's education policies related to this topic in the past 10 years. Table 2 displays the core content extracted from teacher education development and reform policies. The period from 2012 to 2013 marked a critical juncture in teacher education policy reforms in China. In 2012, the State Council issued a landmark policy document delineating systemic reforms to elevate the quality of the national teaching workforce by 2020 [47]. Subsequently, in 2012, pivotal government agencies jointly formulated concrete implementation measures, establishing new mandatory teacher training systems and benchmarks [48]. Additional policies in 2013 instituted national standards for teacher selection exams, qualifications, and exam content to operationalize the reform vision [52], [53]. The years 2017-2018 marked a strategic inflexion point in China's teacher education policy, with significant directives from the State Council and Communist Party charting major reforms. Two policies went on to serve as the guiding frameworks for the reform and enhancement of China's teacher education system over the subsequent five years. The policy issued in 2017 [61] notably expanded policy priorities beyond just enhancing teachers' professional competencies. This shift towards encompassing ethical, ideological, and overall development signified a broader conception of teacher education policy. Subsequently, in 2018, the blueprint for policy [4] set ambitious five-year goals for optimizing teacher training systems, career pathways, social status, and support mechanisms. Alongside continuous improvements in teacher education and skills, these directives notably emphasized strengthening teacher ethics and fostering innovation capabilities for the first time. They also present new requirements for teachers' digital proficiencies, aligning with China's development needs.

Table 2. The core content of teacher education development and reform policies reviewed documents

Reviewed document	Year	The core content of the policy
[47]	2012	The overarching objective was to cultivate a high-quality, professional cadre of educators by 2020. The cadre would be distinguished by superior moral integrity, professional distinction, a balanced composition, and significant dynamism.
[48]	2012	Outlining the practical steps for the effective implementation of the strengthening of the construction of the teaching force policy.
[52]	2013	The qualifications were for teacher selection examinations, methodologies for conducting these exams, and the content encompassed within the examinations.
[53]	2013	It mandated every teacher to undertake a training program spanning no fewer than 360 hours across a five-year cycle. Simultaneously, a teacher training credit system was implemented, making training credits a necessary prerequisite for regular teacher qualification registration, teacher assessment, and appointment to positions and titles.
[61]	2017	The substantial directive proposed that the reform and development of teacher education should be encouraged across five distinct facets, including enhancing the ethical foundations of teachers and boosting their overall quality.
[4]	2018	The policy set forth an inclusive objective: after approximately five years of concerted effort, the teacher training system should be fundamentally sound, the career development pathway should be comparatively smooth, and the professional allure of the teaching profession significantly amplified.
[26]	2021	Organizing an in-depth study of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important exposition on teachers' ethics and style and strengthening teachers' "Four Histories" learning education. Carrying out publicity and study of outstanding typical and advanced deeds of teachers, guiding teachers to learn and practice the standards of teacher ethics in the new era. Focusing on carrying out teacher ethics warning education.
[10]	2022	Initially, it elucidated the political mission of training teachers in the new era in China, that is, the dual responsibility of educating citizens for the governance body and fostering talent for the nation. Next, it stressed that the upliftment of teacher education quality should engage the deep participation of local governance bodies, schools, and all societal sectors. Thirdly, it charted the progression from the establishment of a fresh teacher education system in 2012 to the refinement of the teacher education system in 2017 and the current focus on sculpting a high-quality teacher education system. Lastly, it advocated the development of a platform for collaborative enhancement of teacher education.

In 2021 to 2022, the policies ushered in several pivotal transformations [10], [26]. They underlined the comprehensive enhancement of ideological and political education for teachers through dedicated training programs and standardized learning. A notable change in policy evolution is the shift from merely emphasizing the strengthening of teachers' ideological and political education to a more extensive and concrete elaboration of the importance of teachers' ideological and political standing and their mission to contribute to the development of education in a socialist state. This undoubtedly makes more specific demands of Chinese teachers in terms of their beliefs and convictions. The change reveals the government's strategic aim to align teacher development with broader national goals through more prescriptive political education and value inculcation. This has profound implications regarding the government's conception of the teaching profession's role in transmitting state ideology and agenda.

### 3.1.2. Pre-service teacher education

From the content analysis of policies concerning pre-service teacher education, we deduce the alterations in China's education policies on this subject over the past decade. Table 3 presents the core content extracted from pre-service teacher education policies. The period between 2014 and 2018 marked a significant phase in the evolution of pre-service teacher education policies in China. The introduction of the Excellence Teacher Training Program in 2014 signaled a shift towards a more collaborative and integrated approach to teacher preparation [11]. This iteration of the program incorporated specialized training strategies, while also placing a strong emphasis on moral education [8]. The 2017 Interim Measures allowed accredited institutions greater autonomy in conducting customized qualification exams and interviews, diversifying licensing pathways beyond the national unified test [60]. The 2018 Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan aimed to enhance program quality through initiatives like increased postgraduate quotas and attracting outstanding candidates [62]. Additionally, the overarching goal of the plan released in 2023 is to cultivate professional competencies and foundational teaching skills among teacher education students, thereby contributing to the strengthening of the professional quality and pedagogical capabilities of future educators [9].

The policies from 2014 to 2023 reveal China's strategic efforts to transform pre-service teacher education. The policy trajectory signified a paradigm shift from standardized national models towards more diversified, collaborative approaches for teacher preparation. There is now greater emphasis on integrated development encompassing both specialized subject knowledge and moral education. Customized accreditation pathways have also expanded, allowing reputable institutions autonomy in conducting qualification assessments beyond just the national unified test. This enables diversification and flexibility aligned with local contexts and needs. Additionally, policies advocate expanded quality programs, increased

recruitment of exceptional candidates, and strengthened cultivation of professional competencies and foundational teaching skills. Collectively, these strategic policy changes aim to bolster the professional quality and capabilities of future teachers.

Table 3. The core content of pre-service teacher education policies reviewed documents

Reviewed document	Year	The core content of the policy
[11]	2014	The initiative transformed the training paradigm for emerging educators, giving rise to a novel mechanism for teacher education that necessitates a synergistic collaboration between universities, local governance bodies, and primary and secondary schools. The program primarily explored an integrated model for teacher training at the undergraduate and master's education stages, which included holistic design, segmented assessments, and continuous training.
[60]	2017	It established an evaluation apparatus for the majors offered by educational establishments training teachers and enforced professional accreditation. Upon successful attainment of professional certification, majors that cleared the second-level accreditation were granted the autonomy to organize the interview section of the primary and secondary school teacher qualification examination within their institutions. Those who triumphed in the third-level accreditation were empowered to independently arrange both the written and interview portions of the teacher qualification examination. As a consequence, the avenues for teacher education students to acquire teacher qualification recognition diversified, evolving from mere participation in the national unified teacher qualification examination.
[8]	2018	The comprehension of moral education by teacher education students extends from the original teacher training system, co-organized by universities, local governments, and primary and secondary schools, to a more diverse and layered teacher training system. The novel system applied different training modes to instruct teacher education students, depending on the type of teachers intended to be cultivated. For instance, an integrated training model was employed for kindergarten teachers, a school-enterprise cooperative "dual teacher" training model was utilized for vocational schoolteachers, and a combination of special education knowledge and skills integrated with subject education teaching, coupled with joint training by teacher education schools and medical schools, was used for special skills schoolteachers.
[62]	2018	Supporting the development of normal undergraduate majors, and increasing the number of professional degree authorization points for Master of Education and Doctor of Education. Encourage colleges and universities to expand the enrolment of Master of Education and doctoral degrees in education. Several early childhood teacher training colleges and some early childhood teacher training colleges would be successfully run. Attracting high-quality students to apply for the normal major through various methods.
[9]	2023	The plan encouraged colleges and universities to provide teacher education module courses for the plan's graduate system through independent training or joint training with normal colleges and universities, including no fewer than 18 credits in education, psychology, and primary and secondary school courses. Courses in teaching, history of science and technology, as well as no fewer than 8 credits of educational practice, fully implemented the 'dual tutor system' in which teachers from universities and teachers from primary and secondary schools jointly guided educational practice, and strengthened the cultivation of professional quality and basic teaching skills in normal school students.

### 3.1.3. In-service teacher education

By analyzing the content of policies focused on in-service teacher education, we can ascertain the shifts in China's related educational policies over the last 10 years. Table 4 displays the core content extracted from in-service teacher education policies. The evolution of China's in-service teacher training under the national teachers training program (NTTP) from 2012 to 2020 can be systematized into three stages. During 2012 to 2014, the NTTP established curriculum standards and introduced an information technology course, aligning teacher competencies with emergent educational technologies [49]–[51]. In the 2015 to 2017 phase, the program refined the selection criteria for training institutions and implemented a credit-based management system, promoting accountability in teacher development [54]–[56]. Lastly, from 2018 to 2020, the focus expanded to include ethical and classroom management training, with targeted models for different career stages and locales, notably enhancing rural education through strategic county-level initiatives [64]–[66]. Meanwhile, recognizing the importance of emerging internet and digital technologies, the Chinese government has initiated two policies to incorporate these innovations into teacher training and development [63], [67].

The NTTP reforms and supporting technology policies reveal concerted strategic efforts to continuously optimize and modernize China's national in-service teacher training system. The ongoing reforms to China's NTTP over the past decade reveal an increasing prioritization by policymakers of localized, values-based, and context-specific models for in-service teacher training. These strategic shifts in program design and content show policy recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot adequately meet the diverse training needs of China's teacher workforce across different regions, subjects, and career stages. The tailored, differentiated training initiatives specifically targeting rural educators signify responsiveness to the particularly pressing needs in rural areas. Furthermore, the expansion of training focused on ethics, ideology, and classroom management indicates policy efforts to cultivate not just professional competencies

but also the values, mindsets, and conduct expected of teachers. In addition, the government's simultaneous promotion of educational technology and digital literacy training conveys policy acknowledgement of the crucial role of these skills in enhancing contemporary teaching quality.

Table 4. The core content of in-service teacher education policies reviewed documents

Reviewed document	Year	The core content of the policy
[49]–[51]	2012 to 2014	The policy defined the curriculum standards for teacher training in 2012. In 2013, it added an information technology course. In 2014, it established standards for this information technology training course.
[54]–[56]	2015 to 2017	In 2015, the project innovated the selection criteria for training institutions, and in 2016, it established a credit-based management system for training. Since 2017, the NTTP has focused efforts on training local teacher teams and school-based research, using select counties as demonstration sites for sending teachers to rural areas.
[64]–[66]	2018 to 2020	The policy moved toward differentiated and stratified training models that target specific teacher career stages and settings in 2018–2019. In 2020, the NTTP expanded training content on teacher ethics, classroom management, and moral education, piloting new guidance standards in these domains.
[63]	2018	The plan took full advantage of emerging technologies such as cloud computing, big data, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence to stimulate the construction and utilization of the teacher education digitization teaching service platform. Leveraging the National Teacher Management Information System, the plan bolstered the digitization management of in-service teacher training.
[67]	2019	Its initiative spearheaded teacher information technology application capacity training, harmonized with school information education teaching reform and development, significantly enhanced teachers' digital teaching capabilities and comprehensively fostered the evolution of information technology in education and teaching.

### 3.1.4. Rural teacher education

The analysis of policy content concerning rural teacher education allows us to identify the modifications in China's educational policies in this area over the past decade. Table 5 presents the core content extracted from rural teacher education policies. The training and development of rural teachers in China have been the focus of a series of strategic policy initiatives aimed at enhancing the educational landscape in rural areas. The Rural Teacher Support Plan in 2015 expanded the existing curriculum to include an information technology capability training course. This addition was a response to the demands of an increasingly information-centric society and aimed to modernize the instructional methods of teachers in rural settings [57]. Furthering this initiative, the Ministry of Education released a comprehensive Rural Teacher Training Guide in 2016. This guide was a significant step toward ensuring the quality and efficiency of rural teacher training by establishing regulations and requirements [59]. In 2020, the policy framework for rural teacher development underwent a notable evolution with the enactment of a new policy. This directive underscored the significance of professional and ethical education for teachers. This policy redefined their role, emphasizing the cultivation of their internal humanistic spirit [69].

The training and development policies for rural teachers in China reveal a shifting strategic focus over time. While earlier policies like the 2015 Rural Teacher Support Plan emphasized extrinsic incentives like technology training to modernize instructional methods, the 2020 directive signifies a paradigm shift towards intrinsic motivation and values-based development. This policy transition suggests that the government recognized that sustainable improvements in rural education require not just skills upgrading but also cultivating teachers' internal humanistic spirit and professional ethics.

Table 5. The core content of rural teacher education policies reviewed documents

Reviewed document	Policy title	Year	The core content of the policy
[57]	Notice of the General Office of the State Council on the issuance of the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015 to 2020)	2015	The policy added an information technology capability training course to the existing curriculum.
[59]	Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the issuance of Training Guidelines for Rural Teachers	2016	The guide provided regulations and requirements for four key forms of rural teacher training: Sending Teachers to Rural Areas, integration of online learning and school-based study, and the construction of rural teacher workshops.
[69]	Opinions of the Ministry of Education and other six departments on Strengthening the Construction of Rural Teachers in the New Era	2020	The policy placed a significant emphasis on the professional and ethical education of teachers. The focus aimed to inspire an intrinsic motivation in teachers to devote themselves to rural areas.



### 3.2. Emerging challenges

The landscape of teacher education policies in China is characterized by its dynamic evolution and continuous development. The journey of teacher education in China reflects a persistent endeavor to adapt to shifting educational paradigms, societal demands, and global trends. This ongoing evolution, while signaling progress, inevitably introduces new challenges that test the resilience and adaptability of the system.

#### 3.2.1. Pre-service teacher education

The implementation of the National Unified Teacher Qualification Examination by the Chinese government in 2013 left a significant footprint on pre-service teacher education [72]. Despite the concerted efforts to alleviate the negative aftermath of this transformation through subsequent implementation documents such as Excellence Teachers 1.0 and 2.0 [8], [11], a spectrum of challenges persists. A substantial issue confronting teacher education in China is the phenomenon termed the “de-normalization” of teacher education in universities and colleges [73], [74]. The term, “de-normalization” refers to a shift in pedagogical focus that occurred as the teacher education system moved from a closed to an open model. In the quest to elevate universities and college scientific research capabilities, many higher education institutions specializing in teacher education in China chose to adopt a comprehensive development path. This strategic decision led to a deviation in the positioning of teacher-training colleges and universities away from a primary focus on teacher education [75]. Consequently, it resulted in a misalignment between the setup of teacher education majors and the requirements for teacher training. This divergence has led to a decline in the quality of training for teacher education students and a decrease in their employment aspirations. The pressing need to reverse this impact of “de-normalization” and reinstate the prestige of teacher education thereby becomes evident in this context, necessitating teacher education majors’ reaffirmation as a core pillar within the educational system [76].

#### 3.2.2. In-service teacher education

On the positive side, surveys have indicated high satisfaction rates among teachers regarding training [77] due to the national standards and systematic approach to professional development. The curriculum additions such as information technology were praised for equipping teachers with needed knowledge and skills. The selection criteria also helped improve training quality and accountability [78]. The ongoing reforms signify that optimizing the NTTP’s design and delivery to suit China’s diverse teacher population remains a policy priority. Tailoring training content and models to particular teacher needs, emphasizing school-based learning, and addressing ethical teacher competencies represent encouraging developments. However, impact evaluation, teacher involvement in program development, localized flexibility, and sustained school-based support are still needed to truly realize the NTTP’s aspirations of strengthening the teaching profession nationwide [79]–[81].

#### 3.2.3. Rural teacher education

Challenges continually emerge from the existing structure of in-service teacher education and professional development. The system often displays fragmentation, lack of coordination, and redundancy in its approach to content selection and aim formulation for rural teacher training [82], [83]. The scenario results in inconsistent quality in teacher education. Consequently, it is frequently observed that rural teachers have lower levels of specialization, which inhibits their capability to adjust to emerging pedagogical philosophies and curriculum reforms [84], [85]. The validity of training measures is also compromised under these conditions [86]. Building a system for professional development and training of teachers that accurately responds to diverse levels and needs, and improving evaluation mechanisms for the teacher training system, may constitute some of the critical challenges that the Chinese government must confront.

### 3.3. Implication

The review of teacher education policies in China from 2012 to 2023 highlights several critical implications for the future development of the teacher education system. In the sphere of pre-service preparation, reversing the trend of declining training quality and employment aspirations resulting from the “de-normalization” of teacher education is imperative. Teacher training programs need to be re-established as foundational pillars within higher education institutions. While customized teacher licensing pathways should continue expanding to optimize the certification system, a delicate balance between standards and teacher involvement is required. Pre-service policies must also enhance school-based learning and research capabilities while still ensuring teacher candidates acquire adequate subject knowledge. For in-service teacher professional development, increased localization and differentiation of training content and models based on diverse teacher needs and school contexts are necessitated. Moreover, incorporating teacher input, conducting rigorous impact evaluations, and providing sustained school-based support are essential to ensure

that in-service training translates into tangible improvements in teaching practices and student learning outcomes. Tackling regional disparities and unequal resource allocation also remains critical for strengthening nationwide in-service teacher training. In the realm of rural teacher education, improving coordination, reducing fragmentation, and elevating expertise are vital for enhancing the quality and validity of training programs. Robust funding commitments, quality incentives, and rigorous mechanisms to recruit and retain talents are needed to bolster rural teacher education policies.

### 3.4. Discussion

The evolution of teacher education policy objectives in China aims to continuously enhance teacher professionalism and cultivate outstanding educators. It also seeks to advance teaching environments across different periods, which aligns with conclusions from existing relevant research [1], [3], [87]–[91]. However, new insights contrasting with current scholarship on China's teacher education policies emerge through a granular examination of the policy transformations, challenges, and impacts from 2012 to 2023. Particularly in the realms of pre-service, in-service, and rural teacher education policies, analysis reveals complex interplays between policy changes and implementation realities. Additionally, the research underscores fundamental tensions between responsiveness and foresight in strategic policymaking. In research methods, the paper provides more detailed, evidence-based, and systematic scrutiny of China's teacher education policies than previous studies [3], [87], [89], [91], which may utilize more limited qualitative approaches. We screened out 33 teacher education policy documents in China based on the evaluation criteria of systematic analysis. These documents provide a rich corpus for assessing the trajectory and nuanced dimensions of policy changes. They provide evidence-based assessments to determine the congruence between policy intentions and implementation realities, and to evaluate the direct and indirect consequences of these policies on China's teacher education ecosystem. Within the 33 rigorously selected documents, a meticulous categorization was undertaken based on the substantive content of each policy document. This categorization facilitated a focused analysis of key documents within each category, aiming to identify policies that have had a significant impact on the respective themes over the past decade. The detailed classification yielded 8 policy documents related to general teacher reforms and development. Additionally, the categorization identified 5 documents pertaining to pre-service teacher education and 11 documents concerning in-service teacher education, highlighting the nuanced approaches to enhancing teacher readiness and ongoing professional development. Furthermore, 3 documents were specifically related to rural teacher education, addressing unique challenges and strategies pertinent to rural settings. This strategic categorization and subsequent in-depth policy content analysis not only enhance our understanding of the specific impacts and challenges associated with each policy area but also underline the dynamic nature of policy evolution in response to the shifting educational landscape in China. By examining these documents, we gain crucial insights into the mechanisms through which policy initiatives have been crafted and adjusted to meet the evolving needs of the education sector, thereby providing a robust foundation for future policy formulation and implementation.

The qualitative synthesis identifies key policy objectives, reforms, and themes, while the quantitative meta-analysis assesses the significance and impact of these policies based on empirical evidence. By synthesizing complex evidence and identifying principal outcomes, this research provides evidence-based insights that are crucial for reflecting upon and constructing decisive and efficient education policies. While the issues highlighted in the review have validity, several related topics still necessitate deeper exploration.

#### 3.4.1. Major findings

The epoch from 2012 to 2016 in Chinese educational policies underscores the creation of a teacher education system that harmoniously intertwines theory with practice. This is a testament to China's unwavering commitment to teacher education and a resolute determination to elevate the quality of all educators, with a distinctive focus on those serving in rural locales. However, the deeper transformation of teacher preparation processes remained limited in this timeframe [90], [92]. Over the period from 2017 to 2023, China's teacher education policies have substantially amplified their focus on the cultivation of teachers' ethical values. Policies engage with ideological and political education for teachers and lay significant emphasis on augmenting teachers' innovative competencies and the application of information technology. With a goal towards holistic enhancement of teachers' professional development, these policies are designed to aptly fulfil the demands of educational evolution in this new era [90]–[94].

Previous studies [95], [96] show that universities, local governance bodies, and primary and secondary schools' collaboration helped improve practical skills, problem-solving, and research abilities for both preservice and experienced teachers. This finding is consistent with the results of our study. China's teacher education policy has achieved certain results through the implementation of a series of multi-agent cooperation and has continued to emphasize this importance in subsequent policies. However, in the sphere of pre-service teacher education, challenges exist in aligning diverse interests, ensuring two-way

communication between theory and practice, and motivating participation. Some cooperation remained superficial or lacked sustained engagement. The policies show promise for teacher development but require effort to build mutual understanding, shared goals, and sustained commitment between partners. Genuine two-way collaboration, not just token gestures, is key to realizing the potential benefits [96]–[98]. While the pre-service teacher education policies were recently adjusted to allow reputable institutions to organize their customized qualification examinations, over-emphasizing entry testing and centralized control have faced ongoing criticisms. Specifically, the certification system has given inadequate attention to ongoing mentoring, professional development, and performance evaluation needed to truly ensure teacher quality beyond entry examinations. There has also been insufficient data to prove these certifications and testing systems have improved teacher quality and educational outcomes. The top-down, centralized approach further lacked flexibility for teachers, regions, and institutions to have input on how best to guarantee teacher quality [1], [99]. Moving forward, a better balance between ensuring standards and incorporating localized teacher and institutional perspectives will be crucial to optimizing China's teacher certification system.

Regarding in-service teacher training, China's national teacher training program (NTTP) has prioritized continuous reforms and evolution since its initiation in 2010 to enhance teacher quality and rural education through large-scale professional development. While empirical evidence on the NTTP's impacts has been limited and mixed, the lack of robust measurable improvements in teaching practice and student learning outcomes warrants concern given the substantial resources invested [79]–[81]. Specifically, more research is needed to examine how the NTTP's differentiated training approaches and expanded ethics education are translating into measurable improvements among diverse teacher groups across China. Program design and content should be continually assessed and refined based on empirical evidence of impacts on teaching practice and student outcomes [81]. The substantial public investments in teacher training also call for ensuring teacher professional development achieves tangible results in classrooms rather than merely increasing teacher qualifications or satisfaction [79], [80].

China's rural teacher development reforms differ from those in other Asian countries due to China's top-down, centralized approach involving national policymakers and expert committees [100]. It is consistent with the results of this study. Judging from the issuing agency of China's teacher education policy, the programmatic rural teacher education policy is still the Chinese Ministry of Education, and local education authorities at all levels formulate specific implementation policies according to different regions. While consensus was reached through expert committees and policy networks [100], problems remain in ensuring comprehensive awareness, sufficient funding, quality teacher recruitment/retention, dynamic staffing policies attuned to rural school needs, and effective implementation incentives. The policies' top-down approach may overlook ground realities and lack rural teacher involvement in design. Stronger provincial coordination, sustainable financing, rigorous entry and exit mechanisms, and expanded non-salary benefits like housing are needed [101]. Impact evaluation is limited, so claims of boosting rural education require more evidence. China's comprehensive effort recognizes rural teacher development's strategic role, but overcoming historically weak rural schooling requires ongoing, data-driven policy refinements and funding commitments.

### 3.5. Limitation

The rigorous systematic analysis helps fill gaps in the literature on China's extensive teacher education policy changes. However, more research is needed on how policies translate into tangible transformations in teaching practice and quality. Additional investigation of the complex interplay between policies and ground realities would be beneficial. Further exploration of teachers' and teacher educators' perspectives could provide crucial context.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The systematic review of teacher education policies in China from 2012 to 2023 reveals major changes, challenges, and implications across pre-service, in-service, and rural teacher training realms. In terms of teacher education development and reform, the evolution of policy has expanded strategic priorities beyond professional competencies to encompass moral, ethical, and ideological development. This signifies a conceptual broadening of teacher education policy objectives in China. The pre-service teacher education landscape has transformed through collaborative, integrated preparation models and diversified licensing pathways. In-service policies establish national standards, leverage technology, and expand ethics training, though imbalanced implementation remains a constraint. Rural teacher initiatives increasingly prioritize enhancing expertise, technology capabilities, and motivation. However, challenges have emerged, like the “de-normalization” of pre-service preparation and fragmented rural training systems. Crucially, policies must reverse declining pre-service quality, tailor in-service training, improve rural coordination, and implement multifaceted, localized approaches. Rigorous impact evaluations are vital. The extensive teacher education policy changes mark China's commitment to elevate the teaching profession. Yet the complex interplay

between policies and ground realities warrants further investigation. Comparative research on how policies shape teaching practice would provide beneficial context.

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