

Original Paper

The Real Situation and Main Problems of Rural Primary School Physical Education in Current China: Based on the Teaching Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

The common problem of rural primary school Physical Education (PE) is the same consensus of the education sector in China. According to the materials obtained from the interviews with the students in the teaching practice process, the common problems of China's rural primary school PE include: insufficient or no physical education class; lack of physical education equipment and sports fields; serious shortage of Physical Education teachers; and nearly no physical education teaching and learning activities based on an established instructional plan. These problems reflect the real state of current rural primary school PE in China, and have always been the basic state of rural primary school PE in China.

Keywords

Rural primary school, Primary school education, Rural primary school Physical Education

1. Introduction

The undeveloped rural education is a continuous bottleneck of China's Education. The rural PE, for its specific characteristics, such as special fields, equipment, etc., faces more obstacles in its development. The title of Xinhua Daily Telegraph, Nov. 24th, 2023, "Shortage of Teaching Staff, Lack Fields and Insufficient Equipment: a scanning photo of China's rural PE" (Zheng, Zhou, & Li, 2023) is the very image of China's current rural PE. What's even more serious is that the rural primary school PE is always being thought to be in the worst condition of China's education. The purpose of this paper is, based on the teaching students' experiences, to make a full and systematic analysis of the rural primary

PE in the present of China.

2. Literature Review

The earliest researchers concerned with China's rural primary school PE are two PE teachers, Liu Meifen and Li Xinfang, who works in the PE College of Heze Normal Institute (Now the name of this educational institution is Heze University) at the time. Liu and Li point out, in their research, that in Shandong Province, "only about 55.5% primary schools offer PE classes to their pupils". (Liu & Li, 1999, p. 57) This means that nearly half of rural primary schools in Shandong Province do not offer PE classes. We should know that Shandong Province is a developed coastal province in China, and its basic education, including primary education, is relatively advanced in China. If it's true, we should get a rational conclusion that the primary school PE in most China's provinces be worse than that of Shandong province. After entering the 21st century, the number of scholars who pay attention to rural primary school PE issues has gradually increased. Four Master's degree dissertations (Li, 2020; Wang, 2014; Wang, 2024; Zou, 2021) examine respectively on the conditions of China's rural primary school PE. Among these researches, Li's research finding is "The opening rate of PE in rural primary schools in Henan Province is insufficient, and some rural primary schools do not even offer any PE class." (Li, 2020, p. 41). Wang Naihao investigates the PE equipment of 36 rural primary schools in southwest region of Shandong Province, and points out that "only 15% schools' equipment condition meets the minimum national PE equipment criteria; and even lower than the former, only 5% schools meet the secondary level of national PE equipment criteria." (Wang, 2014, pp. 8-9) Wang Xiao's study object is the PE equipment status of rural primary schools in Jimo district, Qingdao City, Shandong Province, and the conclusion is "The PE equipment in Jimo district's rural primary schools is insufficient, and cannot meet the different needs of the pupil's PE teaching and sport activities". (Wang, 2024, p. 36) Zou's study result is the rural primary schools "pay less attention to PE work", and "the most teaching contents are free activities". (Zou, 2021, p. 23) Most other studies have reached similar conclusions: PE teaching equipment is insufficient or seriously insufficient (Cao & Xie, 2020; Feng, 2020; Gu, & Jiang, 2012; Lei, & Wu, 2011; Lou, 2023; Shen, 2008; Zhang, 2020); most teaching and learning activities are in a non-planned condition or in a simple same pattern (Cao, & Xie, 2020; Gu, & Jiang, 2012; Lei, & Wu, 2011; Shen, 2008; Wang, 2024; Yu, Lan, & Zhang, 2024; Zhang, 2020); the teaching forces of PE is insufficient or seriously insufficient (Cao, & Xie, 2020; Lei, & Wu, 2011; Lou, 2023; Luo, 2014; Shen, 2008; Zhang, 2020); and insufficient PE courses or no PE courses (Gu, & Jiang, 2012; Shen, 2008). The common conclusion of different scholars' research shows that the problems of rural primary school PE in China are universal and similar, which is a common challenge in the development of the rural primary school PE.

3. Methods

The chief research method used in our study is interview survey.

3.1 Participants

The interviewees are 145 teaching students, whose major is the primary education, from College of Teacher Education, Qilu Normal University, who carry out their teaching practice in different schools in the first half year of 2024. For 46 students' teaching practice school are secondary schools or urban schools, our interviewees in the research are the rest 99 students.

3.2 The rural Schools in which the 99 Students Carry out their Teaching Practice

There are 71 rural primary schools providing teaching practice opportunities for these 99 students. All 71 schools belong to Shandong Province, of which 11 are located in Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City, and others in Taian City. Of all the 60 schools in Taian City, 9 are located in Dongping County, 7 in Ningyang County, 4 in Daiyue District, and 40 in Xintai City.

3.3 Procedure

After finishing their teaching practice in the first ten days of July, 2024, all these 99 student teachers are interviewed face to face in the classroom of Qilu Normal University. In order to gain the factual information, 7 questions are asked of all the interviewees. Two of the seven questions are aimed to gather the data of the rural school education (not just PE) in current China. The first question is, "Through your four-month teaching practice, what things or activities in your practice school do you feel confused or helpless?" The second question is, "Based on your four-month teaching practice experiences, what aspects of current primary school education do you think need to be improved?" In a sense, we think, in a sense, these two problems are actually one problem. During the interview, students are required not to deliberately search for questions, but to say whatever comes to mind.

With the consent of the participants, each interview survey process is recorded by a Sony brand video recorder. After the interview finished, all the videos are transformed into paper version texts. Based on these data, we find that most interviewees mentioned that the situations of the rural primary school PE make them worried very seriously and frequently. All the findings of this research are based on the data that the 99 student teachers provided with us in these interview survey activities.

4. Results

Of all the 99 student teachers, 51 interviewees think there are serious different kinds of PE problems in their practice schools. These problems are the following: insufficient or no PE class; lack of PE equipment and sports fields; serious shortage of PE teachers; and nearly no PE teaching and learning activities based on an established instructional plan.

4.1 Insufficient/no PE Class

In the interviews, we can easily find that the rural primary schools often do not offer any PE classes to the pupils, or just occasionally offer the pupils one or two PE classes, or offer the classes to their pupils only when the educational governmental institutions come to inspect the schools' PE situations. For example, the student teacher Xu, who carries out her teaching practice in a school named Pengji Street, Longgu Primary School, Dongping County, says, "The school I carries out my teaching practice only

offers PE classes to the pupils in the first grade. It offers no PE classes to other grades students. It's very hard for me to understand this way of doing things. For we always emphasize the pupils need grow in an all-round pattern, why the rural schools do not offer any PE classes ? ” Another student teacher, her first name is Gao, and whose practice school is the primary school part of Yuejiazhuangxiang Central School, Xintai City, says, “The primary school part never offers PE classes, except when coping with the inspections from the superior departments. In one big inspection, the school let a math teacher act temporarily as the PE teacher. This teacher complained that he knew nothing about PE, and did a wrong turn round (turn right or left). He felt much ashamed of the matter.” The detailed situations of PE course offering is listed in table 1.

Table 1. The Detailed Situations of PE Course Offering

School name	The offering situations of PE
Pengji Street, Longgu Primary School, Dongping County	Only offer PE classes to the pupils in the first grade, no offering to other grades.
The Primary School Part of Yuejiazhuangxiang Central School, Xintai City	No PE classes, just find someone pretending PE class is offering when leaders come to inspect.
The Huafeng Town Central Primary School, Ningyang County	There are courses in the school timetable, but replaced by other major subject, like Chinese Language and Literature or Mathematics in the actual instruction activities.
Geshi Town, North Village Complete Primary School, Ningyang County	Never offer any PE classes.
Timen Town Central Primary School, Dongping County	Offer very few PE classes.
Baisha Town Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Nearly no PE classes offering.
Shazheng Town, Zhutai Primary School, Dongchuangfu District, Liaocheng City	Less than one PE class in one week, or sometimes less than one PE class in three weeks.
Guodu Town, East Shigou Combined Primary School, Xintai City	The PE classes are seriously insufficient, and never hold a sports meeting.
Yucun Town, Hanshan Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Only learning activities, no other activities.
Shilai Town, Sunquan Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Offer or not offer PE classes depending on teachers' feeling tone, or just let someone pretending PE class is offering when the leaders come to inspect.

Guli Town, Five Dragon Combined Primary School, Xintai City	If the pupils do not complete their homework, I'll have Chinese Language and Literature class to replace PE class.
Lizhizhou Primary School of Shazhen Town, Dazhang Combined School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City	The pupils in first grade all take their PE class in classroom for learning by themselves or watching video programs so as not to be injured.
Longting Town, Aoyin Primary School, Xintai City	The pupils in the school have few opportunities to use the sports fields.
Liudu Town, Guangming Hope Primary School, Xintai City	PE classes, being considered as the rewards for the pupils' good performance, often are deprived of by school teachers or the school master.
Wennan Town, Panchegou Combined Primary School, Xintai City	There are few physical education classes. Even students who have physical education classes can choose to stay in the classroom to study.
Zhengjia Town, Zhendong Primary School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City	No PE classes, and the PE teacher serves as math teacher.

The information listed in Table 1 is just the students who run by chance into the actual situations in their teaching practice, and whether other rural primary schools are the same as such situations needs further investigations. But we are very sure that it's a well-known true fact that the rural primary PE is not valued by people from all walks of life in Chinese society.

4.2 Lack of PE Equipment and Sports Fields

Shortage of sports fields and PE equipment is also a constantly mentioned issue in the process of interviewing with these teaching students. For example, the two teaching students, Du Qianqian and Huang Yami, who carry out their teaching practice in Yuejiazhuangxiang, Dongqiu Combined Primary School, Xintai City, say "The playground is made of soil and full of dust, it's very muddy when it rains." Li Wang and Xu Wenqi, who carried out their teaching practice in Pengji Street, Longgu Primary School, Dongping County, say "In this school, only the pupil in first grade have PE class, but what they could do is just run and/or leap on the soil playground or open place in front of the classroom." This kind of soil field is a common and regular phenomenon in the rural primary schools. A teaching student, Chang Di, who performed the teaching practice in Huafeng Town, Shenzhuang Primary School, Ningyang County, says "The worth thing is there is no sports field, what we have is just a piece of soil on which are some white lines. When the sports meeting is hold, we have to inhale the dust all the daytime." Liu Lingyu, who performed her teaching practice in Guodu Town, East Shigou Combined Primary School, Xintai City, says "Not only this school has no physical equipment, but also no basic sports field. What the pupils could do is just run and chase in the school yard, and

never hold the sports meet.” She says more, “I really hope my practice school has better facilities.” Actually, even if some primary school have some kinds of physical equipment, which usually are locked in the equipment room, and the pupils have no opportunities to use them. In one word, the sports fields and PE equipment in China’s rural primary schools are not just as we wish.

4.3 Insufficient PE Teachers

The serious shortage of professional PE teachers has always been an important problem faced by rural primary school PE. Many students who participated in the interview found this problem during their internship. Although these students’ majors are mainly Chinese Language and Literature, Mathematics or English Language for primary school education, in the process of their practice time, they were asked to serve as the physical teacher or as part-time PE teacher. For example, the student Tang Jingwen, who performed her teaching practice in Yuejiazhuangxiang, Laonan Combined Primary School, Xintai City, says, “My practice school does not lack the major subject teachers, just lacks Music, PE, and Fine art teachers. In deed, of all the local schools, only the central school has a few Music, PE and Fine Art teachers, other primary schools never have such teachers. When coming to this school, I was asked to teaching all the seven classes the Music, PE, and Fine Art curricula.” Wang Guangwei, who performed his teaching practice in Longting Town, Dashapo Combined Primary School, Xintai City, says, “All the teachers in his practice school must teach one major subject, like Chinese Language and Literature, Mathematics, or English Language, and teach simultaneously a few minor subjects, like Music, Fine Art, PE, Science, or Moral Education.” The detailed situations of primary school PE teacher see Table 2.

Table 2. The Situations of PE Teachers in Rural Primary Schools

School name	Situations of Employ of PE Teachers
Yuejiazhuangxiang, Laonan Combined Primary School, Xintai City	No professional PE teacher employed, and the student teacher serving as PE teacher.
Longting Town, Dashapo Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Major subject teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Dawenkou Town Central Primary School, Daiyue District, Taian City	Seriously insufficient PE teachers.
Pengji Street, Longgu Primary School, Dongping County	No PE teacher employed.
Shazhen Town, Six Combined School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City	Mathematics teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Yuejiazhuangxiang, Dongqiu Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Class head teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Longting Town, Shangzhuang Combined	Unprofessional student teacher serving as

Primary School, Xintai City	part-time PE teacher.
The Primary School Part of Yuejiazhuangxiang Central School, Xintai City	No PE teacher employed, and Mathematics teacher acting as PE teacher when the leaders inspecting.
Huafeng Town Central Primary School, Ningyang County	Unprofessional student teacher and none-PE professional teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Yinshan Town, Gengshankou Primary School, Dongping County	Chinese Language and Literature teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Geshi Town, North Village Complete Primary School, Ningyang County	No PE classes, no PE teacher employed.
Luneng Hope Primary School	Chinese Language and Literature student teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
West Zhangzhuang Town, Baisha Combined Primary School, Xintai City	No PE teacher employed.
Shazheng Town, Zhutai Primary School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City	Unprofessional student teacher serving as PE teacher.
Guli Town, Five Dragon Combined Primary School, Xintai City	Unprofessional student teacher serving as part-time PE teacher.
Shilai Town, Zhangjiayu Combined Primary School, Xintai City	No PE teacher employed.
Erzhang Primary School Department of Dazhang Combined School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City	Unprofessional student teacher serving as PE teacher.
Yucun Town, Hanshan Combined Primary School, Xintai City	No PE teacher employed.

From Table 2 we can find that very few physical teachers are employed in primary schools, not to mention professional PE teachers.

4.4 No Established PE Instructional Plan

Besides very few PE classes, shortage of qualified teaching force, insufficient fields and equipment, no established PE instructional plan is also mentioned by the most interviewees. These interviewees frequently complain that the PE classes, in most cases, are not offered based on an established instructional plan. For example, Tang Jingwen, the student mentioned above, says, “My college major is not PE, but one role of my practice teaching in primary school is teaching PE class. I really don’t know how to do this job, so I went to the principle for advice. He just told me ‘just play with the pupil is ok’. The result is I just teach the pupils how to turn right and turn left, and then they are dismissed to

engage in free activities. Free activities are nearly all of my PE class.” Xu Wenqi, the student mentioned above, expresses the same meaning, that is “the pupils’ only activity in PE class is run or jump”. Chang Yanli, the student teacher, who performed her teaching practice in Lizhizhou Primary School of Shazhen Town, Dazhang Combined School, Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City, points out, “In my practice school no PE teacher is employed. The PE class is not based on an established instructional plan, and in most cases, how to carry out PE class totally depends on the teacher’s mood at that time.” The situations mentioned above are what happened in those school where PE classes are offered, and here we can’t help but ask, even if we have a very integral PE instructional plan, what is the value if the school do not offer any physical classes for the pupils?

5. Discussions

The findings of this study show that, at least from the perspectives of these student teachers, there is no fundamental difference between the current predicament of rural primary school PE in China and the situation at the end of the last century. (Liu & Li, 1999) In other words, the situation of China's rural primary school PE has hardly changed in more than 20 years. The PE class is still insufficient or unable to start (Ibid., p. 57); PE teachers/professional PE teachers are still not employed in rural primary schools (Ibid., p. 57); the sports fields and PE equipment are still insufficient (Ibid., p. 57); and the PE classes, if really carried out, are still in a free state (Ibid., p. 57). Our findings are also surprisingly consistent with the recent research results from other colleagues’ work.(see the literature review part) That means all the problems faced by China’s primary school education are always exist, and there seems to be no hope of a solution for this. What are the reasons behind this situation? Let’s see what the student teachers say about the question. Mao Yun, who performed her teaching practice in Shilai Town, Sanquan Combined Primary School, Xintai City, says, “the principle’s educational idea is very ossified, just focusing on the pupils’ achievements, there are no nonacademic activities, no celebration activities for International Children's Day, no sports meeting.” Zhou Lili, another student teacher, expresses the same meaning. She says in the interview, “The school attaches great importance to academic performance. No matter what to do, the pupil academic record always comes first. There are no activities except pupil learning; all nonacademic activities could be skipped. Even the sports meeting and the celebration activities for International Children's Day are only briefly held. The sports meeting was only held for two hours because of the “Top” coming to inspecting.” Both the students attributed the problem of PE in rural primary schools to the principal or the school only focusing on students' academic performance. This is certainly an important reason. But what we want to ask here is, why do schools or school leaders pay special attention to achievements? This is an extremely complex issue, but also a matter of different opinions. We think that Zhou's statement implies at least a deeper reason, that is, without attention from "Top" is a key factor leading to the poor situation of rural primary school PE in China. In an education system that emphasizes centralization, it is self-evident that the “Top” education policy is the most fundamental factor affecting all kinds of education at all levels. Does this

mean that as long as the “Top” policy does not change, this kind of current situation will remain the same? It seems that we can only wait.

6. Conclusion and Research Suggestions

This study is basically consistent with the previous and recent studies of other researchers, that is, the situation of rural primary school education in China is not optimistic, and it seems that there has been no improvement for two decades. These problems include: the school does not offer PE or insufficient classes; Serious shortage of sports venues and PE equipment; There are no special PE teachers, especially lack of professional PE teachers; The implementation of PE activities just at will, but not based on the established instructional plan, etc. These PE problems in rural primary schools, at least from the information obtained from the interview survey of our research, also exist in some urban primary schools. Although this paper has made a simple analysis of the reasons for this situation, it is not a conclusive result and needs to be further studied. At the same time, how to deal with these problems, which may be more complex than analyzing the reasons, and may not be effective, needs more attention and in-depth and systematic research from peers in the education sector.

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