



Study on the Factors Influencing Subjective Social Status on Teachers' Willingness to Stay in Small-Scale Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT

Background: The retention of rural small-scale schoolteachers (RSSTs) plays a pivotal role in advancing educational development in China's rural areas. Gaining insights into how RSSTs' subjective perceptions of their social standing affect their intentions to remain in post is critical for informing educational policy and practice in these regions.

Objectives: This research investigates the extent to which RSSTs' subjective social status influences their intention to continue teaching. The study further explores the mediating role of professional identity and the moderating role of educational beliefs within this relationship. **Methods:** Employing a generalised structural equation modelling (GSEM) approach, data

were collected from RSSTs across five provinces located in central and western China. The analytical model integrated professional identity as a mediating variable and educational beliefs as a moderator within a regression framework. **Results:** The analysis indicates a significant positive association between RSSTs' subjective social status and their retention intentions. Professional identity was found to partially mediate this relationship, suggesting that individuals who perceive themselves to have higher social standing tend to develop a stronger sense of professional identity, thereby increasing their likelihood of remaining in their roles. Additionally, educational beliefs were shown to positively moderate the relationship between subjective social status and retention intention. However, their moderating influence on the link between professional identity and retention intention did not reach statistical significance. **Conclusion:** To improve retention rates among teachers in small rural schools, it is advisable to introduce initiatives that elevate teachers perceived social status, strengthen the interplay between professional identity and the intention to stay, and foster robust educational beliefs within the teaching community.

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental driver of national development and individual well-being, serving as a key mechanism for nurturing talent and providing intellectual capital to support China's rural revitalisation – a strategic initiative aimed at fostering social equity (Moloi & Dlomo, 2024). For an extended period, rural education has suffered from inadequate resources and diminished job satisfaction, reflecting a systemic weakness within China's broader educational framework (Wang and Zhang, 2022). To elevate educational quality and promote equitable development within basic education, it is essential to allocate educational resources judiciously, prioritising rural, remote, underprivileged, and ethnically diverse regions.

As China's education system has evolved, numerous rural schools have either been closed or merged. Despite this trend, a specific category of schools – small rural schools – continues to operate. These institutions are typically situated in village-level primary schools and teaching outposts within economically disadvantaged rural areas, generally enrolling fewer than 100 students. Due to the interplay of geographical remoteness, economic limitations, and social constraints, small rural schools are often characterised by a limited number of classes, staff, and pupils, as well as structural imbalances in teacher distribution (Hillyard, 2020). Although individually modest in scale, these schools are widespread. According to the National Statistical Bulletin of Education (2023), among the 149,100 standard primary schools in China, 76,900 are rural small-scale institutions, constituting over half of the total. Within China's strategic blueprint for basic education, these small schools are expected to continue fulfilling crucial educational responsibilities in some of the most challenging environments.

RSSTs are integral to the delivery of education in these contexts, underscoring the need to address their working conditions and their inclination to remain in post. Despite their essential role, RSSTs represent a vulnerable workforce that merits societal recognition in alignment with China's commitment to educational equity. Teachers are widely acknowledged as the foundation of educational fairness and a decisive factor in school performance, with teacher quality being a key differentiator between successful and less effective schools (Snoek, 2021). However, the recruitment and retention of competent educators in rural settings remain problematic, hindered by persistent historical challenges, physical isolation, inadequate financial incentives, and insufficient societal attention. Consequently, even the fundamental functions of small rural schools are often compromised, adversely impacting both educational standards and student opportunities (Goodwin, 2023).

In such rural contexts, RSSTs frequently experience elevated levels of anxiety in both their professional and personal lives, which impedes progress towards educational equity. These educators often face extended working hours, occasionally surpassing legal thresholds (Allen et al., 2021), leaving minimal time for personal recuperation (Wang & Shi, 2024). The already heavy workload is intensified by severe staff shortages, compelling RSSTs to teach multiple subjects and assume diverse responsibilities, including student supervision and administrative duties on and off campus (Engle et al., 2024; Toropova et al., 2021). Moreover, teachers in small rural schools generally earn lower salaries than their urban counterparts, further limiting the recognition of their efforts (Gluckman et al., 2024). The absence of adequate systems for professional growth, coupled with the scarcity of high-quality educational resources and development opportunities (Fairman et al., 2022),

exacerbates disparities and hinders balanced urban–rural educational advancement. Under such conditions, the compounded stress of excessive workloads, limited institutional support, and high job demands places RSSTs at considerable risk of physical and psychological strain (Ozyildirim, 2024), ultimately compromising the quality of instruction and contributing to higher attrition rates.

Although teacher retention has been widely studied – often in relation to mobility and workforce turnover – much of the research has focused on international settings. Chapman (1983) first introduced a model of teacher retention, which has since underpinned extensive inquiries into the factors shaping educators’ intentions to remain in or leave their roles. Previous studies have explored the impacts of demographic attributes, career pathways, and professional traits on teacher retention, as illustrated in the works of Opoku et al. (2020), Van den Borre et al. (2021), and Ingersoll and Tran (2023). However, empirical investigations specifically addressing the situation of teachers in China’s small rural schools remain scarce.

A teacher’s intention to leave is a strong predictor of actual departure and typically reflects job satisfaction and a willingness to continue teaching in the current school (Madigan & Kim, 2021). In China’s less-developed rural areas, educators hold a distinctive professional identity shaped by traditional values that place education – and educators – on par with revered elements such as heaven, earth, the emperor, and kin. However, the shift towards market-oriented educational reform has gradually weakened this traditional ethos (Liu, 2020). Many RSSTs find themselves torn between the legacy of these cultural values and the pressures of contemporary performance expectations. This raises critical questions regarding how perceived social status influences their commitment to remain in their roles.

Given that a teacher’s self-perception of their professional role is instrumental in determining their willingness to teach in rural schools, this dimension warrants closer examination. As Wang and Zhang (2022) notes, a teacher’s professional identity is closely associated with decisions to remain or leave. Furthermore, how educators perceive their social standing significantly shapes their professional self-concept. The interrelationship between social status and professional identity may therefore offer valuable insights into why some teachers opt to stay while others resign. In addition to these factors, educational beliefs are also pivotal, as they drive educators to engage in teaching practices that fulfil their psychological needs. Research indicates a positive association between strong educational beliefs and a long-term commitment to teaching (Maaranen et al., 2019). Accordingly, the present study seeks to explore how subjective social status impacts the retention intentions of teachers in small rural schools. It also aims to examine how professional identity, and educational beliefs serve as mediating and moderating variables within this relationship. Further investigation into these dynamics is essential to formulate strategies that enhance teacher retention in rural contexts.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Subjective Social Status and Retention Intentions

A central concept in sociology is social status, which refers to an individual’s or a group’s position within a social hierarchy (Kahraman & Çelik, 2020). This construct

consists of two interrelated dimensions: objective social status (OSS) and subjective social status (SSS). OSS, often synonymous with socioeconomic status, is based on quantifiable indicators such as income, educational attainment, and occupational role. These factors determine individuals' placement within socioeconomic tiers and reflect tangible social and economic distinctions. In contrast, SSS pertains to individuals' personal perceptions of their social position. Unlike OSS, which is grounded in measurable criteria, SSS captures how individuals assess their own status relative to others, often based on perceived past, present, and anticipated future conditions. Archibald and Neupert (2022) explain this evaluative process through the notion of horizontal mobility, whereby individuals form perceptions of status by comparing themselves with others over time.

While OSS categorises individuals using explicit, external indicators, SSS reflects internalised understandings and personal interpretations of social standing. As noted by Chen et al. (2021), subjective perceptions are shaped by psychological processes and contextual comparisons, allowing individuals to define their own social position within broader social frameworks. According to UNESCO, the sociological status of teachers comprises a range of factors, including societal perception, professional authority, and the nature of their roles. These are further influenced by employment conditions, remuneration, and benefits in comparison to other professions. In this study, SSS is used as the key measure of social status, given its ability to capture more subtle psychological elements often overlooked by objective indicators. SSS has also been found to significantly influence retention intentions, reflecting its psychological relevance. Existing research demonstrates that rural teachers who perceive themselves as having a lower subjective status are more likely to consider leaving their roles due to inadequate resources (Bates et al., 2024).

Recognising the importance of both OSS and SSS enhances understanding of social stratification and its behavioural implications, especially in professional fields such as education. Despite the valuable insights provided by prior studies, further research is required to explore the dynamics between these dimensions of status in greater depth. Additionally, empirical evidence indicates that enhancing rural teachers' perceptions of their own social status may strengthen their motivation to continue working in these environments. This highlights the potential for improving the stability of the rural teaching workforce by addressing subjective perceptions (Yuan & Bai, 2021). Based on this foundation, the present study proposes a hypothesis aimed at further exploring how social status relates to empathetic development and professional commitment among rural educators.

H1: *The subjective social status of rural teachers has a positive influence on the intention of rural teachers to stay in rural teaching positions.*

Mediating Effect of Professional Identity

Tajfel (1978) theory of social identity offers a valuable framework for analysing how individuals classify themselves within social structures and affiliate with various groups. According to this theory, individuals tend to associate with groups that provide external validation and personal satisfaction, with membership often based on characteristics such as race, nationality, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, and age. Membership in such groups fosters a sense of belonging and access to social support, which reinforces an individual's identification with the group's goals and responsibilities. This affiliation

cultivates strong emotional ties, fostering commitment to collective efforts and a sense of accountability.

Social identity theory primarily aims to elucidate how individuals' perceptions of in-group and out-group affiliations shape their attitudes, social cognition, and behaviours. In contemporary settings, individuals often strive to maintain a positive social identity, a pursuit that extends into professional domains. In this context, cultivating a robust professional identity is essential. As noted by Creed et al. (2020), professional identity encompasses an individual's comprehension of their occupational role, societal significance, and the broader implications of their work. It represents the integration of professional functions and values into an individual's self-concept, influenced by their personal beliefs and the social meanings attached to their profession.

However, for individuals who encounter difficulty in affiliating with professional groups – such as displaced entrepreneurs, consultants, small-scale business operators, or the unemployed – the benefits of group affiliation may be less perceptible. As a result, the alignment between personal values and a professional sense of purpose may diminish, potentially leading to disengagement. In such cases, dissociation from the group, including voluntary departure from the profession, may become a considered course of action. This discourse underscores the explanatory power of social identity theory in analysing group dynamics and understanding the formation and evolution of professional identity. Further exploration into how this theoretical model influences motivation and job satisfaction across diverse occupational fields could yield valuable insights.

Empirical evidence suggests a close relationship between teachers' perceptions of their subjective social status and their professional identity. For example, Yip et al. (2022) examined how changes in teachers' perceived social status influenced their professional development and career trajectories. Their findings indicated that the perceived level of societal recognition significantly affected how teachers constructed their professional identities. Similarly, Hong (2025), in a study of rural special education teachers, reported that diminished subjective social status contributed to a weakened professional identity. There is substantial support for the assertion that a teacher's professional identity significantly affects their intention to remain in or exit the profession. Zhai et al. (2023) identified a negative association between occupational identity and both job stress and turnover intentions. Conversely, Arnold and Rahimi (2025) presented an alternative perspective, suggesting that a strong professional identity may either enhance retention or prompt departure, depending on how it aligns with personal and professional expectations. Thus, a teacher's degree of professional identity plays a crucial role in shaping their decisions regarding job continuity. Moreover, societal perceptions of the teaching profession are influential in shaping teachers' occupational attitudes and their commitment to remain. Alexander et al. (2020) argued that negative public perceptions of teachers and teaching contribute to elevated stress levels and additional challenges, which may discourage teachers from continuing in their roles. Based on these findings, the current study proposes a hypothesis grounded in the interplay between subjective social status, professional identity, and retention intention.

H2: *The mediating impact of RSSTs' professional identity is found between their social status and retention intentions.*

Moderating Effect of Educational Belief

Educational beliefs encompass the internal motivations that shape teachers’ decisions, attitudes, and behaviours. These beliefs act as a foundational framework, sustaining educators’ long-term commitment to their profession. They represent core moral or spiritual convictions that influence not only how teachers interpret their responsibilities but also how they interact with learners and participate in pedagogical practices. For rural educators, educational belief constitutes a significant component of their broader belief system, shaped by a range of external influences, including personal history, professional ideals, relationships with students, and disciplinary knowledge structures (Olivos & Yuan, 2023).

Li and Xing (2019) assert that educators who possess strong educational beliefs are more inclined to remain within the teaching profession. This sustained engagement fosters a social climate that both values the teaching role and elevates the status of educators. The authors contend that when teachers express commitment and affirmation towards their professional duties, it fosters a more favourable societal perception of the teaching profession. Moreover, Bates et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of framing teachers as social entrepreneurs – individuals capable of driving societal innovation. This perspective positions educators as agents of positive change and, in doing so, promotes their professional recognition and social status. Their mixed-method research revealed that such recognition could positively influence both the recruitment of pre-service teachers and the retention of in-service educators.

Li et al. (2022) examined the determinants of professional identity among teachers and reported a significant correlation between educational beliefs and professional identity. Their findings suggest that educators who perceive teaching as a means of achieving personal fulfilment exhibit a more pronounced sense of professional identity than those who view it primarily as a source of income. This conclusion aligns with broader empirical evidence, which indicates that intrinsic motivation functions as a full mediator between occupational stress and reduced personal accomplishment in autonomous professional roles (Loopers et al., 2024). In light of these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed within the framework of this study.

H3: Educational beliefs play a positive moderating role in the subjective social status to enhance the retention intentions of RSSTs.

H4: Educational beliefs play a positive moderating role in the promotion of retention intentions of RSSTs by professional identity.

Drawing upon the preceding discussion, this study proposes an influence pathway model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

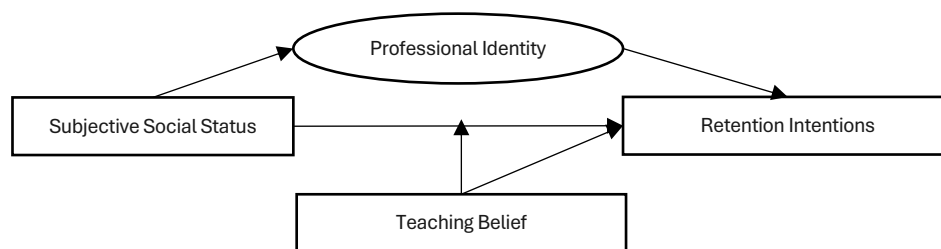


Figure 1: Influence Path Model Diagram

Research Design

Sample

Our research team has focused extensively on rural education. Through field visits and thorough investigations, we have developed a comprehensive understanding of the professional and personal lives of rural teachers, providing a solid basis for the collection of primary data. The data utilised in this study were obtained via a survey conducted among teachers in small rural schools across five central and western provinces and autonomous regions of China—namely Henan, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Guizhou, and Tibet—between 2019 and 2020. The survey garnered a total of 1002 valid responses. These participants represented diverse demographic characteristics, including gender, marital status, household registration, age, teaching tenure, annual income, and professional rank. The dataset contains detailed information on the teachers' backgrounds, educational beliefs, professional identities, subjective social status, and their intention to remain in their current roles. This comprehensive dataset provides a robust foundation for analysing the factors that influence rural teachers' motivation to continue in their positions.

Variable Selection

Dependent Variable: Retention intention is a dichotomous variable. Following the approach of [Molho et al. \(2020\)](#), this study utilises the item: 'If re-selected, will you consider leaving the teaching profession?' as an indicator of retention intention, applying reverse scoring. Responses are coded as 1 = will stay, and 0 = will not stay.

Independent Variable: The independent variable in this study is subjective social status. This was measured using the method developed by [Adler et al. \(2000\)](#), which presents respondents with a ladder consisting of ten levels, where 10 represents the highest social status and 1 the lowest. Participants selected an integer between 1 and 10 to indicate their perceived social standing.

Mediating Variable: Professional identity, treated as a latent variable, was measured using a scale adapted from [Fan \(2023\)](#). The scale comprises seven items, including statements such as 'I believe that teachers' work plays an important role in the development of human society'. It encompasses four dimensions: professional pride, professional growth, salary advantage, and work-life balance. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). Higher scores indicate a stronger professional identity. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the scale in this study was 0.729, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Moderating Variable: Educational belief was operationalised as a dichotomous variable. The item used to assess this was: 'If you choose to work in our school, the most important consideration is whether you love teaching and educating people'. Responses were categorised into two groups: 0 = no, and 1 = yes, following prior research conventions.

Control Variables: Based on prior studies, significant differences in rural teachers' turnover intention have been observed in relation to gender, teaching experience, educational background, marital status, professional title, and personal monthly income ([Viano et al., 2023](#); [Wang et al., 2022](#)). Accordingly, this study includes the following control variables: gender (1 = male; 0 = female), marital status (1 = married; 0 = unmarried),

household registration (urban or rural), annual income (measured as total personal income over the previous year), and professional title (1 = assistant level and below; 2 = secondary; 3 = first; 4 = above advanced). Given the larger scale of income values compared to other variables, income was logarithmically transformed using the function $\ln(1 + \text{annual income})$ to normalise its distribution.

Analysis Method

This study employs the GSEM approach to estimate the model for the dichotomous dependent variable of teacher retention intention. GSEM facilitates the examination of complex relationships between variables through a path analysis framework. Unlike conventional Structural Equation Models (SEM), GSEM adapts the analysis technique according to the nature of the dependent variable – whether continuous or categorical – during the regression process. This flexibility ensures that the analytical method is better suited to the specific characteristics of the data and the research objectives.

Findings

Sample Description Statistics

The statistical summary reveals that females constitute the majority of educators in rural small-scale schools, representing 63.77% of the total sample. Married individuals make up 84.93%, significantly outnumbering their unmarried counterparts. The distribution of household registration is evenly split between teachers from rural and urban areas. In terms of age, the predominant group falls within the 36 to 45-year range, accounting for 52.7%, while those younger than 25 and older than 55 each comprise roughly 5% of the population. Concerning teaching tenure, over one-third of teachers have between 11 and 20 years of experience, with approximately 10% having less than 3 years and a similar proportion exceeding 30 years of service. Income levels display notable variation, with nearly half of the teachers earning between 30,000 and 50,000 yuan annually, whereas only 10% receive more than 80,000 yuan per year. Furthermore, the majority of teachers hold professional ranks corresponding to the first and second levels.

Table 1

Sample Description Statistics (N=1002)

Variable	Type	Number	Ratio (%)
Gender	Male	363	36.23
	Female	639	63.77
Marriage	Married	851	84.93
	Unmarried	151	15.07
Household Registration	Rural	520	51.90
	Urban	482	48.10
Age (Year)	≤ 25	49	4.89
	25-35	188	18.76
	36-45	528	52.70
	46-55	192	19.16
	≥ 55	45	4.49

Table 1 (continued)

Sample Description Statistics (N=1002)

Variable	Type	Number	Ratio (%)
Teaching Age (Year)	≤ 3	110	10.98
	4-10	138	13.77
	11-20	352	35.13
	21-30	290	28.94
	≥ 30	112	11.18
Annual Income (ln(1+income))	≤ 3	160	15.97
	3-5	495	49.40
	5-8	230	22.95
	8-10	61	6.09
	≥ 10	56	5.59
Professional Title	Assistant Level and Below	131	13.07
	Secondary	377	37.62
	First	393	39.22
	Above Advanced	101	10.08

Statistical Results of Main Variables

The retention intention among RSSTs in China is comparatively low, as indicated by the primary variable statistics outlined in Table 2. Specifically, just over half of the respondents express a willingness to continue working in rural areas. Examination of subjective social status reveals that teachers perceive themselves at an average level of 3.721 on a ten-point social class scale, situating them within the middle to lower social strata. Additionally, the mean level of professional identity among teachers in small rural schools is moderate, recorded at 3.571. It is noteworthy that the educational beliefs of this group tend to be positioned at an upper-middle level, which represents a favourable aspect.

Table 2

Variable Description of Statistical Table (N = 1002)

Variable	Average	Standard Deviation
Subjective Social Status	3.721	0.072
Vocational Identity	3.571	0.014
Teaching Beliefs	0.746	0.014
Retention Intention	0.516	0.499

GSEM Analysis Result

Main Effect Test

The findings indicate that, after controlling for gender, age, marital status, household registration, teaching experience, and annual income, subjective social status exerts a significant positive influence on retention intentions ($\beta = 0.020, p < 0.01$), thereby confirming hypothesis H1. This suggests that enhancing subjective social status represents a viable strategy to increase the willingness of RSSTs to remain in their positions.

Test of Mediating Effect

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that subjective social status positively influences professional identity ($\beta = 0.029, p < 0.001$), and professional identity significantly enhances retention intentions ($\beta = 0.653, p < 0.001$), thereby confirming hypothesis H2. Furthermore, after introducing the mediating variable, the effect of subjective social status on retention intentions remains significant. This demonstrates that professional identity partially mediates the relationship between subjective social status and the retention intentions of Rural School-Stationed Teachers (RSSTs), with the indirect effect accounting for 47.5% of the total influence.

Table 3

Mediating Results in the SEM

Mediation Effect Test	Estimate	Mediation Effect Proportion
Total Effect	0.040***	-
Direct Effect	0.021**	-
Indirect Effect (SSS→PI→RT)	0.019***	47.5%

Note: SSS= Subjective Social Status; PI= Professional Identity; RT= Retention Intentions.

Test for Moderation Effect

The results indicate that educational belief strengthens the positive effect of subjective social status on the retention intentions of RSSTs ($\beta = 0.044, p < 0.01$), thus confirming hypothesis H3. However, educational belief does not demonstrate a significant moderating effect on the relationship between professional identity and retention intentions ($\beta = 0.007, p > 0.05$), and therefore, hypothesis H4 is not supported.

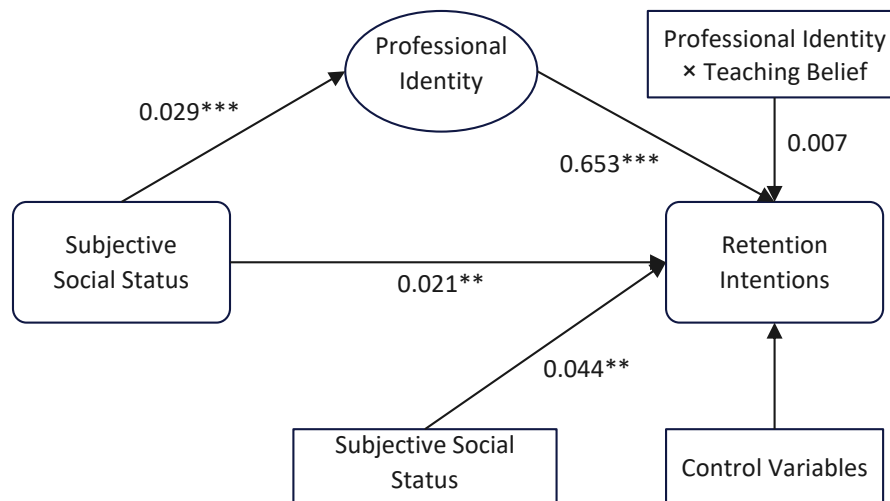


Figure 2: Path Coefficient Diagram of Mediated Moderation Model * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

Using survey data from small-scale rural teachers, this study examined the relationships among subjective social status, professional identity, educational belief, and retention intention by employing a GSEM. The findings indicate that subjective social status positively influences the inclination of teachers in rural small schools to remain in their current positions. Additionally, professional identity serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between subjective social status and retention intention among RSSTs. The study further revealed that educational beliefs may enhance the positive effect of subjective social status on teachers' retention intentions in rural settings.

Supporting previous research, and based on consistent evidence from multiple studies, it is suggested that several factors can predict the likelihood of teachers in small rural schools choosing to stay in their roles: perceived social status, professional identity, and educational beliefs. Understanding these variables is essential for efforts aimed at stabilising the rural teaching workforce. The results demonstrate that teachers' professional intentions are positively affected when they feel respected and valued within their communities. Furthermore, professional identity encompasses a teacher's sense of belonging and purpose within the profession, which also impacts retention. Finally, teachers' educational beliefs regarding teaching and learning contribute to their commitment to their schools. Therefore, recognising and addressing these factors may facilitate the development of more effective strategies to support rural teachers, which is crucial for improving educational outcomes in these communities. Future research could further explore the interplay between these variables and their influence on teacher retention in rural areas. Although this study has limitations, broadening its scope could provide deeper insights into this important topic.

The Relationship Between Subjective Social Status and Retention Intentions

Based on the findings of [Bridwell-Mitchell and Fried \(2020\)](#), the decision of RSSTs to remain in their roles is influenced by their perception of social status. Social stratification theory explains how individuals and groups are categorised according to the resources they possess, which largely determine their social standing. At present, people in China increasingly identify themselves with a 'lower' class status compared to individuals in other countries, a conclusion that our results corroborate. Within China's dual rural-urban social structure, rural residents are often regarded as socially inferior to their urban counterparts. This disparity fosters a strong desire among rural communities to improve their living conditions, which may, in turn, encourage rural teachers to consider leaving their profession in pursuit of higher social status.

In rural areas, the teaching profession faces competition because the surrounding reference groups generally occupy lower social strata. Our findings suggest that an increase in social status enhances teachers' willingness to remain in small rural schools. Consequently, it is essential to strengthen societal respect for teachers and prioritise education. Efforts should focus on elevating the social status of teachers in rural contexts, as such improvements can significantly affect their retention decisions. Moreover, given the challenging living conditions and demanding responsibilities faced by rural teachers as frontline educators, policy interventions recognising and enhancing their social status

could further support their commitment. In conclusion, while this study highlights the link between social status and teacher retention in rural areas, it also acknowledges certain limitations. Future research could investigate how specific policy measures might be utilised to improve the social standing of rural teachers, thereby better motivating them to continue their professional careers.

The Subjective Social Status of RSSTs Indirectly Affects Their Retention Intentions through Professional Identity

Enhancing the quality of work and fostering a sense of job satisfaction among rural teachers, as well as reducing role conflicts, are directly contingent upon the professional identity of these educators. Skinner et al. (2021) affirm that a strong professional identity significantly strengthens a teacher's commitment to their educational responsibilities. As noted by Skinner et al. (2021), this commitment subsequently influences the degree of enthusiasm and engagement teachers exhibit in their roles. Recent literature emphasises the critical role of professional identity in influencing teachers' willingness to serve in small rural schools. For instance, Cai (2020) found that teachers with a robust professional identity are more inclined to express a desire to continue their teaching careers. Furthermore, subjective social status—defined as how individuals perceive their own social standing—is linked to RSSTs intentions to either persist in or leave the profession, with professional identity acting as a mediating factor. This finding aligns with Peng and Yu (2022), reinforcing the notion that professional identity is a pivotal determinant in teacher retention.

Ultimately, improving the work experience and retention rates of rural teachers hinges on a deeper understanding and support of their professional identity. Prioritising this element is crucial for ensuring the stability and efficacy of education in rural areas. Future research could explore additional variables that influence this relationship and propose more effective strategies for supporting and retaining teachers. The research further demonstrates that teachers' subjective social status primarily determines their willingness to remain in rural small-scale schools. This influence manifests in two ways: directly, through social status impacting their intention to stay, and indirectly, where social status shapes professional identity, which in turn affects retention intentions. This suggests that subjective social status is a significant factor in the development of professional identity, which subsequently influences teachers' decisions to continue in the profession.

However, evidence indicates that the direct, linear relationship between subjective social status and retention intention is absent. Instead, subjective social status tends to elevate professional identity, which then promotes the intention to stay. This phenomenon can be better understood through work psychology and social comparison theories. Work psychology research suggests that individuals with higher social standing derive greater meaning from their work, while social comparison theory posits that those who perceive themselves as professionally superior experience healthier emotional responses, enhanced self-worth, and a stronger sense of accomplishment. These factors collectively contribute to a more robust professional identity.

Consequently, efforts to enhance the retention of teachers in rural small-scale schools should focus not only on raising subjective social status but also on strengthening

professional identity, as both play crucial roles. Practical measures might include implementing teacher title systems, reforming salary structures, and increasing remuneration. Such initiatives can help create a supportive environment for teachers in small rural schools, fostering professional growth and encouraging them to remain in their positions. It should be noted that these findings warrant further exploration to address existing limitations within the study.

Educational Belief Positively Moderates the Positive Impact of Subjective Social Status on the Intention to Stay in Rural Small Schools

Teachers' subjective social status has a significant negative impact on their decision to remain in rural primary schools; however, this effect is moderated by educational beliefs, which notably mitigate its adverse influence. This finding aligns with the research of [Karakus et al. \(2021\)](#). Specifically, teachers who derive satisfaction from their profession tend to exhibit greater resilience when facing work-related challenges, thereby increasing the likelihood of their continued employment in these positions. These insights highlight the critical role of educational beliefs in enhancing teacher retention in small rural schools. Educational beliefs encompass the values and convictions educators hold regarding their work and its significance. To nurture and reinforce teachers' educational beliefs in such environments, it is essential to foster intrinsic motivation and to acknowledge the importance of education in underprivileged rural areas. Equally important is the cultivation and preservation of teachers' passion for teaching, which holds as much significance as their commitment to the school itself.

Collectively, these results suggest that the belief systems and passion for teaching possessed by educators substantially influence their decisions to remain within challenging school contexts. Future studies could further investigate targeted strategies to effectively cultivate and strengthen these educational beliefs among rural teachers. The mediating role of educational beliefs in the relationship between retention intention and other variables was found to be non-significant, possibly due to the complex factors influencing rural teachers' educational beliefs. Research has identified two primary categories of these factors. The first pertains to personal characteristics of teachers, such as gender, age, educational and life experiences, teaching tenure, and personality traits. The second involves social and environmental influences, including prevailing social and cultural value systems, family circumstances, school climate, and workplace conditions ([Xu, 2020](#)). From both the individual teacher and social environmental perspectives, these factors appear to have minimal association with professional identity among rural small-scale school teachers.

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the research is subject to regional restrictions due to funding limitations, with the sample comprising rural small-scale school teachers from only five provinces in central and western China. Consequently, the study did not encompass all provinces, notably excluding the ten key counties supported by the National Rural Revitalization initiative. Secondly, the retention intentions of teachers in small rural schools are shaped by a

complex array of factors. Although this research thoroughly examined the impact of subjective social status, professional identity, and educational beliefs on teachers' willingness to remain, it did not investigate other potentially influential variables. Future studies should seek to overcome these limitations by expanding the geographic scope of the sample and integrating additional critical factors that affect retention intentions among rural small-scale school teachers.

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