

The Current Status and Reinforcement Pathways of Career Stickiness Among Public-Funded Teacher Trainees for Rural Schools in China

Chuang Yan¹ & Yuying Dai¹

¹ Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong 524048, China

Correspondence: Chuang Yan, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong 524048, China.

doi:10.63593/JARE.2026.06.03

Abstract

Public-funded teacher trainees' education in China represents a national strategic initiative aimed at precisely supplying high-quality teachers to rural schools. As prospective rural educators, these students constitute a vital force for building future rural teaching faculties. However, the persistent structural dilemma of "retaining personnel through contract compliance while failing to retain their commitment" continues to hinder their long-term engagement in rural education. To explore the internal mechanisms underlying their retention in rural teaching, this study adopts a mixed-methods design grounded in the eastern, western, and northern regions of Guangdong Province. Drawing on 128 valid questionnaires and 11 in-depth interviews, we empirically examine the current status of career stickiness among public-funded teacher trainees. The results indicate that their overall career stickiness is above the medium level, exhibiting a distinct pattern characterized by "normative dominance and emotional deficiency." Career choices are largely driven by external contractual constraints, whereas endogenous emotional identification and value commitment remain underdeveloped. To bridge this gap, we propose an integrated "three-pronged" support strategy: enhancing local identity at the emotional level, optimizing contractual mechanisms at the institutional level, and expanding professional growth pathways at the developmental level. We recommend coordinated efforts across universities, administrative agencies, and school management to facilitate a profound transition from "contractual compliance" to "emotional rootedness," thereby providing robust teacher support for rural educational revitalization.

Keywords: public-funded teacher trainees, career stickiness, emotional stickiness, normative stickiness

1. Introduction

China's public-funded teacher trainees policy—initially termed "free normal education" and later renamed—is a state-sponsored program designed to attract talented individuals into teaching and cultivate high-caliber educators

(Chen, 2007). These students fall into three main categories: (1) National public-funded teacher trainees, trained by six normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education (Yao, 2008); (2) Local public-funded teacher trainees, recruited and trained by provincial authorities to

serve rural or remote areas within their respective jurisdictions (Wang & Yang, 2018); and (3) The Targeted Teacher Special Training Program, a subcategory targeting central and western China's less-developed regions (Zhu, 2023). Public-funded teacher trainees' education constitutes a localized training model under the broader local policy framework, employing a "targeted recruitment, targeted cultivation, and targeted employment" structure to supply compulsory education teachers specifically for rural schools (Ruan & Wang, 2024). In Guangdong Province, for instance, the program launched in 2018 has produced five cohorts of graduates, significantly strengthening the teaching workforce in underdeveloped regions.

However, as the policy has matured, the primary challenge has shifted from "recruitment difficulty" to "retention difficulty" (Zhang & Yin, 2024). While binding contractual obligations have secured the short-term objective of ensuring public-funded teacher trainees' physical placement in rural schools, a sustainable mechanism for retaining them long-term and enhancing their instructional quality remains underdeveloped. Current evidence reveals that some in-service targeted teachers equate their mandatory service period with mere "contractual compliance," exhibiting passive engagement characterized by a physical presence but psychological detachment—in extreme cases, culminating in contractual breaches (Zhang & Xue, 2022). A notable proportion regard their assigned posts as mere "stepping stones," displaying a pronounced tendency toward utilitarian compliance. Without endogenous motivation to commit deeply to rural education, the structural dilemma of "easy compliance but difficult rootedness" persists. If such a mindset of passive, contract-bound compliance remains uncorrected, it will not only fail to substantially improve rural educational quality but also fundamentally contradict the original policy intent. Therefore, moving beyond unilateral contractual regulation to facilitate a paradigm shift—from perfunctory "contractual performance" to genuine "rootedness in rural communities"—has emerged as a critical imperative demanding urgent attention in both policy implementation and scholarly inquiry.

Existing literature predominantly examines retention through external factors—such as salary, job security, and rational-choice assumptions—yet lacks systematic attention to

individual psychological attachment mechanisms. Career stickiness theory offers a fitting analytical framework, transcending traditional turnover models by integrating four dimensions: affective commitment, normative obligation, continuance commitment, and perceived opportunity costs. Accordingly, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate career stickiness among public-funded teacher trainees in Guangdong's less-developed regions. Three research questions guide our inquiry: (1) What is the overall level and structural profile of their career stickiness? (2) Do significant differences exist across demographic subgroups? (3) How can intervention pathways be constructed to facilitate their transition from passive "compliers" to active "rooted practitioners"?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundation: An Integrative Framework of Career Stickiness

Originating in organizational behavior, *career stickiness* refers to employees' loyalty, retention intention, and sustained engagement toward their profession, position, or organization. It reflects an intrinsic, multidimensional psychological attachment shaped by professional identity, growth opportunities, and contextual factors—encompassing both voluntary commitment and involuntary entrapment.

Building upon the three-dimensional structure of "organizational commitment" (Meyer & Allen, 1991), this study conceptualizes career stickiness across four dimensions: affective stickiness, normative stickiness, continuance stickiness, and opportunity-based stickiness. Affective stickiness denotes an individual's genuine identification with the goals and values of their profession, a desire ("want") to remain, and an emotional dependence manifesting as willingness to contribute proactively. It represents intrinsic belonging based on emotional identification. Normative stickiness reflects a sense of social responsibility and moral obligation, wherein individuals feel they "should" remain due to loyalty and perceived duty—a form of moral commitment grounded in contractual obligations. Continuance stickiness describes a situation where individuals feel "forced" to stay because leaving would entail losing accrued benefits (e.g., salary, seniority, specialized skills), making the switching costs prohibitively high. It

constitutes a conversion barrier rooted in sunk costs. Opportunity-based stickiness arises when limited external employment options mean individuals feel they “can only” remain in their current role. This dimension involves weighing external alternatives. These four dimensions, while distinct, are interrelated, collectively forming an integrative framework that captures the multifaceted dynamics—internal affect, external constraints, cost-benefit calculations, and environmental limitations—influencing public-funded teacher trainees’ retention decisions. To elucidate the formation mechanism of career stickiness, this study integrates Job Embeddedness Theory, Switching Cost Theory, and Employee Retention Theory as its theoretical lenses.

First, Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell & Lee, 2001) provides a macro-level structural perspective. Mitchell and Lee proposed the metaphor of a “web,” suggesting individuals are embedded within networks of social and professional connections. They identified three key elements: Links (formal and informal connections), Fit (perceived compatibility between the individual and their environment), and Sacrifice (perceived costs of leaving). In this study, affective stickiness maps onto the “fit” between targeted students and the rural educational context; normative stickiness reflects the strength of their “links” to the local community; and continuance stickiness quantifies the “sacrifice” entailed by departure. High career stickiness thus signifies a densely embedded state: the tighter the web, the greater the resistance to leaving.

Second, Switching Cost Theory reveals the economic logic underpinning stickiness. It categorizes switching costs into procedural (e.g., learning curve), financial (e.g., monetary losses), and psychological (e.g., uncertainty anxiety) dimensions (Yin et al., 2016). For public-funded teacher trainees, penalties for breach of contract, adverse records in personal archives, and the time and financial costs of re-taking civil service examinations constitute significant “continuance stickiness.” This economically rational “passive adhesion” explains why some students persist despite lacking emotional identification.

Finally, Employee Retention Theory contributes a dynamic perspective. Traditionally focused on turnover, this theory emphasizes understanding why employees stay. Holtom, Mitchell, and Lee (2006) highlighted the need to examine the

determinants of organizational attachment. The theory employs a “push-pull” framework: factors like rural education ethos and job stability exert “retention pull,” while urban high-salary offers and harsh rural living conditions generate “turnover push.” Career stickiness essentially represents an equilibrium state resulting from the interplay of these forces. A transition from passive compliance to active rootedness occurs when the pull derived from affect and norms sufficiently counterbalances the push from external opportunities.

2.2 Literature Review: Retention Intentions of Public-Funded Teacher Trainees

Scholarship on retention has focused on structural features, influencing factors, and mechanisms.

2.2.1 The Dual Structure of Retention Intentions

Retention intention is not monolithic but comprises distinct psychological components. A national survey of 2,514 public-funded teacher trainees across 20 local universities found that their intention consists of “contractual compliance intention” and “rural mission commitment,” with the former outweighing the latter by a factor of 1.73 (Shan et al., 2025a). Latent profile analysis further identifies five subtypes: Idealistic, Contractual, Ambivalent, Illusory, and Rejective (Zhou et al., 2024). Even among those “willing to stay,” the underlying motivations vary considerably. Longitudinal studies note a V-shaped fluctuation in retention intentions over four years of university, with students from rural hometowns exhibiting the strongest intentions (Shan, 2025b). These findings underscore the necessity of dissecting the internal structure of “retention intention.”

2.2.2 Influencing Factors of Retention Intentions

Individual attributes significantly shape retention intentions. Paradoxically, higher-achieving students with stronger comprehensive qualities tend to breach contracts and avoid returning to rural posts. For instance, students from elite provincial universities exhibit significantly lower return intentions than those from local institutions (Shan et al., 2025a). This suggests that higher competence may correlate with elevated career expectations, leading to aversion when confronted with limited development prospects in rural settings. Enrollment motivation is also pivotal: those motivated by “love for rural education” demonstrate stronger local sentiments (Liang,

2025). From a relational perspective, during university, targeted students face weakening cultural ties to rural areas, insufficient expansion of social connections, and increasingly negative self-perceptions regarding rural life. Conversely, those maintaining strong cultural connections with their hometowns show higher return intentions (Xie, 2025).

Environmental constraints are equally critical. Qualitative research characterizes targeted students' experience as "adrift within the establishment," oscillating between survival gaps and institutional rigidity, stability versus freedom, and professional dignity versus self-deprecation (Fan et al., 2026). Longitudinal tracking reveals widespread dissatisfaction regarding heavy workloads coupled with low salaries, and a significant mismatch between received and desired professional support (Ruan & Wang, 2024). Applying ERG theory, Zhao and Li (2024) identify: unmet survival needs, strained interpersonal relations, and constrained growth needs. When basic livelihood and career advancement are both compromised, retention intentions suffer severely. Furthermore, policy implementation exhibits structural flaws: inflexible entry-exit mechanisms, career "glass ceilings," imbalanced compensation neglecting emotional needs, and excessive emphasis on duties over rights (Zhang & Bai, n.d.). Even if pre-service cultivation fosters initial retention willingness, unsupportive institutional environments can erode it post-employment.

2.2.3 Mechanisms Underlying Retention Intentions

Research also explores the mechanisms at play. Motivation for teaching serves as a critical pathway from passive compliance to active rootedness. Teacher support positively predicts compliance intention, with professional identity partially mediating this relationship, moderated by teaching motivation (Zhang & Bai, n.d.). Regarding local integration, targeted students must navigate a progressive process: production integration → life integration → emotional

integration, to transition from written "contract" to spiritual "rootedness" (Liu & Yang, 2025). Overall, institutional constraints provide the push for staying, while emotional bonds with the locality exert the pull; their interaction ultimately determines retention decisions.

While existing research has advanced understanding of the features, factors, and mechanisms influencing retention, notable limitations remain. Most studies focus on pre-service intentions rather than the dynamic consolidation of retention behaviors. Moreover, nuanced distinctions among different motivational substrates of retention remain underexplored.

3. Research Design

3.1 Methodology

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, following a "quantitative-dominant, qualitative-complementary" logic. First, quantitative survey data were analyzed to statistically describe and infer the overall level of career stickiness and group differences. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to uncover deep-seated psychological drivers and behavioral logics underlying the quantitative patterns. This integration of numerical breadth and narrative depth mitigates the limitations of mono-method approaches.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Quantitative Sample

The quantitative sample comprised in-service public-funded teacher trainees currently fulfilling their service obligations in the eastern, western, and northern regions of Guangdong. Using random sampling, 142 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding invalid responses, 128 valid questionnaires were retained (valid response rate = 90.14%). The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 128)

Variable	Items	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	31	24.22
	Female	97	75.78
Teaching Experience	1 year	91	71.09

Education Level	2 years	18	14.06
	3 years	8	6.25
	4 years	11	8.59
	Junior College	10	7.81
	Bachelor's	112	87.50
Home Location	Master's (incl. enrolled)	6	4.69
	Urban	33	25.78
	Rural	95	74.22

As shown in Table 1, the sample exhibits the following features: Females (75.78%) significantly outnumbered males, aligning with the typical gender distribution in teacher education programs. The majority (71.09%) had only one year of teaching experience, indicating they were novice teachers at a critical juncture for career adaptation and retention decisions. Most held a bachelor's degree (87.50%) or higher (4.69%), reflecting an upgrading of training standards. Notably, 74.22% hailed from rural hometowns, underscoring the "localized" nature of the recruitment. This structure closely mirrors the broader population of public-funded teacher trainees in Guangdong, supporting the sample's

representativeness.

3.2.2 Qualitative Sample

Following the survey, 11 participants were purposefully sampled for semi-structured interviews, adhering to maximum variation sampling principles (see Table 2). Selection ensured diversity in gender, rural/urban origin, and teaching experience to capture a range of typical cases. Online audio interviews lasted 20–40 minutes each. Verbatim transcripts were coded and analyzed to provide in-depth qualitative insights complementing the quantitative findings.

Table 2. Interview Participant Profiles

Code	Gender	Home Location	Teaching Experience	Subject
A01	Female	Urban	1 year	Primary Chinese
A02	Male	Rural	2 years	Secondary Music
A03	Female	Urban	2 years	Primary Chinese
A04	Male	Rural	1 year	Primary Chinese/English
A05	Female	Urban	1 year	Primary Math
A06	Female	Rural	3 years	Primary Chinese
A07	Female	Urban	2 years	Primary Math
A08	Female	Urban	2 years	Primary Math
A09	Female	Rural	2 years	Kindergarten
A10	Male	Unspecified	2 years	Primary Chinese
A11	Female	Rural	2 years	Primary Chinese/English

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Quantitative Instrument

The Career Stickiness Questionnaire for public-funded teacher trainees was developed based on the four-dimensional theoretical model. It comprises 20 items across four subscales: (1) Affective Stickiness (5 items; e.g., emotional

identification, sense of belonging); (2) Normative Stickiness (5 items; e.g., moral obligation, contract adherence); (3) Continuance Stickiness (5 items; e.g., sunk costs, switching barriers); and (4) Opportunity-Based Stickiness (5 items; e.g., perceived lack of alternatives). Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating

stronger stickiness.

Reliability and validity tests demonstrated excellent psychometric properties (Table 3). Cronbach's α for the total scale was 0.940, and subscale α s ranged from 0.839 to 0.905, indicating high internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.901, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 2156.37$, $p < .001$), confirming suitability for factor analysis and good structural validity.

Table 3. Reliability of Career Stickiness Scale

Dimension	Items	Cronbach's α
Emotional Stickiness	5	.905
Normative Stickiness	5	.850
Continuance Stickiness	5	.858
Opportunity Stickiness	5	.839
Total Scale	20	.940

3.3.2 Qualitative Instrument

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, comprising 10 open-ended questions aligned with the four dimensions of career stickiness. Topics included enrollment motivations, emotional experiences in rural teaching, perceptions of contractual obligations, and career aspirations. The protocol incorporated perspectives from both "rooted" and potentially "leaving" teachers to comprehensively capture psychological states.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for career stickiness are presented in Table 4. The overall mean score was 3.755 (SD= 0.690), exceeding the midpoint of 3. This indicates a relatively stable retention among the cohort, suggesting potential for fostering deeper "rootedness." However, the mean fell below the threshold for "high identification" (≥ 4), highlighting considerable room for improvement.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Career Stickiness (N = 128)

Dimension	Min	Max	M	SD
Emotional Stickiness	1.00	5.00	3.602	0.915
Normative Stickiness	1.00	5.00	4.027	0.738

Dimension	Min	Max	M	SD
Continuance Stickiness	1.00	5.00	3.698	0.818
Opportunity Stickiness	1.00	5.00	3.694	0.776
Total	1.00	5.00	3.755	0.690

Comparisons across dimensions revealed a significant "one-core, multi-polar" imbalance: normative stickiness stood prominently high, while affective stickiness formed a distinct "lowland." Dimension means ranked as follows: Normative (M= 4.027) > Continuance (M= 3.698) > Opportunity-Based (M= 3.694) > Affective (M= 3.602).

Normative Stickiness Dominance: The highest score indicates that contractual spirit and social responsibility are the primary current anchors. While validating policy efficacy, this also implies retention is driven more by external obligation than internal volition.

Passive Stickiness Middle Ground: Continuance and opportunity-based stickiness, both forms of "passive stickiness," occupied the middle ranks. They reflect a rational compromise based on weighing sunk costs and external alternatives—staying "because one cannot leave easily" or "has nowhere better to go."

Affective Stickiness Deficiency: The lowest score on this critical bridge between "compliance" and "rootedness" reveals a pervasive risk of psychological disengagement ("present but absent"). The lack of endogenous motivation based on value identification constitutes the primary bottleneck hindering long-term commitment.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 5) revealed highly significant positive intercorrelations among all career stickiness dimensions ($p < .01$), indicating complex synergistic effects.

Table 5. Intercorrelations Between Career Stickiness Dimensions (N = 128)

	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional Stickiness	1			
2. Normative Stickiness	.778**	1		

	1	2	3	4
3. Continuance Stickiness	.537**	.532**	1	
4. Opportunity Stickiness	.574**	.608**	.760**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

High Coupling of Affect and Norm: The strong correlation ($r = .778$) between affective and normative stickiness suggests a symbiotic relationship: strong contractual responsibility can foster professional affect, while deep emotional identification reinforces compliance and conscientiousness. This provides a theoretical basis for facilitating the transition from passive to active rootedness.

Strong Linkage of Real-World Constraints: The very high correlation ($r = .760$) between continuance and opportunity-based stickiness forms a robust “real-world shackle.” Economic rationality plays a major role in retention

decisions. Crucially, such cost-benefit-based stickiness is fragile and may dissolve rapidly if external conditions improve (e.g., increased urban job opportunities).

Relative Independence of Affective Identification: Correlations between affective stickiness and the two “constraint” dimensions (continuance and opportunity-based) were comparatively lower ($r \approx .55$). This suggests affective identification, while influenced by practicalities, possesses a degree of autonomy. Enhancing affective stickiness may be the most effective strategy to resist external temptations and buffer against environmental hardships.

4.3 Non-Parametric Tests (Mann-Whitney U)

4.3.1 Gender

Mann-Whitney U tests (Table 6) indicated significant gender differences across all dimensions and total career stickiness ($p < .05$). Male teachers exhibited significantly higher stickiness levels than their female counterparts on all measures.

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U Test Results: Gender (Male vs. Female)

Dimension	Male (n= 31)	Female (n= 97)	U	Z	p
Emotional Stickiness	4.00 (3.4, 5.0)	3.60 (3.1, 4.0)	1092.0	-2.299	.021*
Normative Stickiness	4.20 (4.0, 4.8)	4.00 (3.6, 4.6)	1059.0	-2.491	.013*
Continuance Stickiness	4.20 (3.4, 4.8)	3.80 (3.2, 4.0)	1052.5	-2.522	.012*
Opportunity Stickiness	4.00 (3.4, 5.0)	3.80 (3.2, 4.0)	1126.5	-2.114	.035*
Total	4.05 (3.5, 4.7)	3.80 (3.4, 4.1)	1063.5	-2.449	.014*

Note. * $p < .05$.

This suggests male public-funded teacher trainees possess stronger intentions, commitments, and stability regarding rural teaching. Potential explanations include gendered social roles and career expectations. In many contexts, teaching offers males relatively stable income and social status congruent with traditional familial provider roles, potentially enhancing satisfaction. Conversely, female teachers often face a more stringent “glass ceiling,” alongside career interruptions due to

marriage and childbearing, leading to greater discrepancies between expectations and reality, and consequently, higher mobility intentions.

4.3.2 Home Location

Mann-Whitney U tests (Table 7) showed that rural-origin students had numerically higher career stickiness across all dimensions and overall compared to urban-origin peers. However, these differences were not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Table 7. Mann-Whitney U Test Results: Home Location (Rural vs. Urban)

Dimension	Urban (n= 33)	Rural (n= 95)	U	Z	p
Emotional Stickiness	3.40 (2.5, 4.0)	3.80 (3.2, 4.2)	1258.0	-1.694	.090

Dimension	Urban (n= 33)	Rural (n= 95)	U	Z	p
Normative Stickiness	4.00 (3.4, 4.2)	4.20 (3.8, 4.6)	1255.0	-1.715	.086
Continuance Stickiness	3.80 (3.2, 4.2)	3.80 (3.4, 4.2)	1449.5	-0.646	.518
Opportunity Stickiness	3.60 (3.0, 4.3)	3.80 (3.2, 4.0)	1469.5	-0.538	.591
Total	3.65 (3.3, 4.1)	3.90 (3.5, 4.1)	1296.5	-1.477	.140

While rural-origin students demonstrated higher numerical scores, the most salient finding is that affective identification levels were similarly low across both groups. This indicates that a “rural background” does not automatically translate into deep “educational sentiment.” Familiarity with the rural environment may reduce maladaptation but does not spontaneously escalate into enduring professional passion. Authentic affective stickiness requires systematic post-enrollment cultivation.

4.4 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analysis triangulated the quantitative results, providing richer contextual understanding.

Normative Stickiness: Interviews confirmed that contractual obligations were the primary reason for staying. Respondents viewed breach of contract as betraying policy support and responsibility to the assigned locality (A05, A06). “Since I chose this path, I’ll do my best during the service term; after all, one must honor agreements” (A06). Some acknowledged that heavy workloads dampened perseverance (A07), yet refrained from resigning due to having benefited from the program’s provisions (A02, A04). This aligns with the quantitative finding of high normative stickiness rooted in both constraint and moral consciousness.

Affective Stickiness: Interviews substantiated the “normative dominance, affective deficiency” pattern. Most respondents could fulfill teaching duties but lacked strong belonging or identification, citing pragmatic enrollment motives like reducing educational costs or securing stable jobs rather than passion for rural education (A03, A08). Only isolated cases expressed positive emotional bonds: “I’d miss the children most. I’ve taught them since Grade 1, watching them grow daily” (A06). Female respondents frequently cited inconveniences in rural life and limited career horizons as barriers to emotional connection (A07, A08). Notably, even locally-born respondents who stayed partly due to proximity (A05, A08) did not express deep

identification. While they adapted better than urban colleagues (A04, A11), this reflected situational adaptation, not emotional commitment. This resonates with the quantitative finding that geographic origin fails to guarantee emotional attachment.

Continuance Stickiness: Interviews highlighted the constraining power of economic, career, and credit-related costs. Respondents noted that experience accumulated in basic education was not easily transferable; resigning would mean forfeiting prior investments and paying penalties. “No thoughts of breaching; I can’t afford the fine” (A01). Abandoning six years of seniority and promotion progress for a fresh start elsewhere was deemed impractical. Breach of contract also risked damaging personal credit records and facing intense competition in future civil service exams (A04). This underscores the passive, economically-driven nature of this stickiness.

Opportunity-Based Stickiness: Most viewed alternative quality jobs as scarce. Some contrasted teaching favorably with local private-sector options, citing stability, holidays, and decent pay as advantages within county-level contexts (A02). Others simply lacked viable alternatives (A07). Crucially, several stated they would reconsider their career choice if lower-stress, higher-paying opportunities arose (A01, A11), revealing the fragility of retention based solely on limited options.

Gender and Origin Nuances: Female interviewees emphasized that long-term retention hinged significantly on local marriage and settlement prospects (A01, A03, A07). Extensive after-school duties, parent-teacher communication, and managing special-needs students added burdens. Male respondents, while acknowledging issues like poor housing or strict management, reported fewer family-care responsibilities and lower overall psychological burden regarding long-term tenure (A02, A04, A10). Regarding origin, locally-born respondents (A04, A05) planned to pursue further studies or

relocate to cities post-service. Those assigned away from their hometowns (A01, A09) indicated their willingness to stay depended heavily on urban amenities; reassignment to remote villages would trigger exit intentions. This confirms that recruiting local talent alone is insufficient; interventions fostering local integration and emotional commitment are essential.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion

This study delineates the complex landscape of career stickiness among public-funded teacher trainees, revealing structural tensions and critical junctures in their transition from “compliance” to “rootedness.”

5.1.1 Structural Tension: “Normative Dependence” vs. “Affective Deficiency”

The prominent “high-norm–low-affect” profile indicates that while contractual obligations secure a baseline of short-term retention, this externally-driven “passive stickiness” is inherently unstable. Once service periods conclude and external constraints relax, commitment lacking affective grounding risks precipitous decline. This echoes Psychological Contract Theory, highlighting the necessity of evolving from transactional to relational contracts. Without internalizing contractual duties into value identification, the end of the service term becomes a point of potential disengagement rather than a milestone of career development. Overcoming “contract dependency” by constructing an endogenous retention mechanism centered on affective identification is therefore imperative for sustainable rootedness.

5.1.2 Policy Blind Spot: Neglect of Gender Heterogeneity

The significant gender differences expose a “one-size-fits-all” bias in current policies. While successful in attracting entrants, policies inadequately address the differentiated challenges faced by women—particularly urban-origin females—within rural contexts. Issues such as work-family conflict, career development bottlenecks, and social network fragmentation during the tenure phase receive scant systematic attention. This support deficit undermines female teachers’ career resilience. Future policy must adopt a gender-sensitive lens, shifting from mere “retention assurance” to fostering “developmental retention.”

5.1.3 Heterogeneous Pathways: “Returnees” vs. “Newcomers”

Differences by family origin illuminate divergent pathways. For the predominant rural-origin cohort (“returnees”), possessing natural adaptive advantages and emotional ties, policy should focus on sustained empowerment: enhancing professional development, recognition incentives, and avenues for value realization to consolidate and elevate their affective stickiness. Conversely, for urban-origin students (“newcomers”), policy must prioritize overcoming alienation: improving living conditions, creating cultural integration opportunities, and establishing robust social support systems to ease initial adaptation and gradually nurture intrinsic emotional bonds with rural education.

5.2 Recommendations

The journey from “compliance” (a starting point of creditworthiness) to “rootedness” (an endpoint of mission) requires a systemic shift from viewing targeted students as “contract compliers” to recognizing them as “value co-creators.” We propose a tripartite reinforcement pathway integrating Emotional Empowerment, Norm Optimization, and Developmental Enablement.

5.2.1 Emotional Empowerment: Building the “Psychological Contract” and Deepening Value Identification

Address the affective deficit through systematic interventions:

Pre-service Cultivation: Integrate rural education modules into curricula. Organize immersive practicums and study tours in rural schools. Invite exemplary rural teachers for motivational talks. Proactively instill the value of “rural education as a promising frontier.”

In-service Identity Formation: Implement mentorship programs pairing novices with experienced rural educators to accelerate professional efficacy. Institutionalize commendations for outstanding rural teachers, enhancing occupational prestige and social recognition.

Community of Practice & Belonging: Encourage participation in village activities (e.g., cultural advising, child welfare committees). Foster deep connections with parents and villagers, integrating personal growth with community development. Create peer-support networks

among targeted teachers to transform the workplace from a “unit” into a “home.”

5.2.2 Norm Optimization: Reshaping the “Contractual Relationship” towards Incentive Compatibility

Move beyond punitive compliance towards developmental partnership:

Humanized Contract Design: Clearly stipulate mutual rights and obligations within agreements. Explicitly guarantee entitlements regarding further training, promotion, and welfare during and after the service period, transforming the contract from a “punitive instrument” into a “development pact.”

Tiered Service Incentives: Explore a “Basic Service Period + Long-term Incentives” model. Offer substantial rewards for continued service beyond the initial term, such as retention bonuses, prioritized promotions, and guaranteed slots for part-time or full-time master’s programs in education, thereby encouraging enduring commitment.

5.2.3 Developmental Enablement: Expanding “Growth Horizons” and Implementing Precision Support

Embed teachers within the rural social fabric:

Role Expansion in Rural Governance: Support teachers in serving as “Rural Culture Facilitators” or “Children’s Advocates,” participating in village governance. Leveraging their educational capital elevates their sense of social value and achievement.

Home-School-Community Alliances: Systematize home visits, open days, and community volunteering to deepen interactions. Being accepted, respected, and needed by families and communities fosters profound emotional bonds.

Differentiated Support: Tailor assistance based on the quantitative insights into subgroup differences. Prioritize support for female teachers regarding work-life balance (e.g., flexible scheduling, childcare facilities, social networking events). For urban-origin teachers, focus on mitigating lifestyle inconveniences and highlighting the unique rewards of rural life. For rural-origin teachers, channel their familiarity into a strengthened sense of professional mission and responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This empirical study of public-funded teacher

trainees in Guangdong’s less-developed regions reveals a career stickiness profile dominated by normative commitment but deficient in affective attachment, marked by significant gender disparities and nuanced rural-urban origin differences. Mere contractual compliance fails to engender deep professional belonging or passion organically. Achieving the leap from “compliance” to “rootedness” demands a systemic reorientation: shifting policy focus from external “contractual coercion” to internal “emotional drive,” and from macro-level “workforce supplementation” to micro-level “individual nurturing.” By synergistically implementing emotional empowerment, norm optimization, and developmental enablement, stakeholders can construct a supportive ecosystem that balances professional prospects with humanistic care. Such an ecosystem holds the potential to ensure these teachers not only “get down” and “stay put,” but also “live well” and “have a future,” ultimately rooting their personal aspirations deeply in the fertile soil of rural education and becoming a genuine driving force for rural educational revitalization.

Fund Projects

This study was funded by Lingnan Normal University’s 2025 Excellent Case Cultivation Project for Foster Virtue through Education: “Exploring a ‘Three-Dimensional Empowerment’ Educational Model for Cultivating Rural-Rooted Commitment Among Public-funded Teacher Trainees” (No. 3); and General Project under Lingnan Normal University’s 2026 “Sailing Initiative” for Postgraduate Research and Innovation: “From ‘Targeted Compliance’ to ‘Local Commitment’: A Study on the Sentiment Evolution Mechanism of Public-funded Teacher Trainees During Career Adaptation” (No. 4).

References

- Chen, S. (2007). An analysis of the training model for public-funded teacher trainees. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (6), 7–11.
- Fan, G., Yang, R., & Han, R. (2026). Drifting within the establishment: Reflecting on policy implementation mechanisms through the survival paradox of public-funded teacher trainees for rural schools. *Teacher Education Research*, 38(3), 26–32.

- Liang, Y. (2025). *Research on cultivating local sentiment among public-funded teacher trainees for rural schools in the new era* [Master's thesis, Guangxi Normal University].
- Liu, X., & Yang, L. (2025). Local integration: The desirable path for rural-targeted public-funded teacher trainees transitioning from "contract" to "rootedness." *Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education*, 43(4), 149–155.
- Meyer, J. P., & Allen, N. J. (1991). A three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment. *Human Resource Management Review*, 1(1), 61–89.
- Mitchell, T. R., Holtom, B. C., & Lee, T. W. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1102–1121.
- Ruan, C., & Wang, F. (2024). Effectiveness review and optimization pathways of policies for public-funded targeted rural teacher cultivation. *Educational Development Research*, 44(22), 57–65.
- Shan, C. (2025). Is it compliance intention or teaching mission?—Based on a survey of return-teaching intentions among public-funded teacher trainees from 20 local colleges nationwide. *Shanghai Teachers*, (2), 171–184.
- Shan, C., Ma, K., Guo, L., & Chen, X. (2025). "Low-quality compliance" versus "high-quality escape": Analyzing factors influencing return intentions among public-funded teacher trainees at local universities. *Fudan Education Forum*, 23(1), 82–91.
- Song, J., Li, X., Yu, M., & Wang, H. (2026). Multidimensional analysis of editorial career stickiness. *Chinese Editors Journal*, (5), 75–80.
- Wang, Z., & Yang, Y. (2018). Local public-funded teacher trainees: Policy analysis and current situation investigation. *Educational Research*, 39(5), 76–82.
- Xie, Q. (2025). How to return home? Rural relations, return logic, and retention pathways of public-funded teacher trainees for rural schools. *Journal of Shangrao Normal University*, 45(5), 100–107, 120.
- Yao, Y. (2008). Tuition-free normal education: Opportunities and challenges for universities directly under the Ministry of Education. *Modern University Education*, (5), 93–96.
- Yin, W., Liu, X., & Tang, B. (2016). A review of switching cost theory and its application in banking. *Finance Review*, 8(3), 80–99, 125–126.
- Zhang, X., & Yin, C. (2024). Influencing factors and optimization paths of rural teachers' retention: An analysis based on the interpretative structural modeling. *Journal of Hubei Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 42(4), 158–168.
- Zhang, Y., & Bai, R. (2026). How is active compliance possible? Research on the impact of teacher support on rural-targeted public-funded teacher trainees' willingness to fulfill contracts. *Ethnic Education Studies*, 1–10. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.15946/j.cnki.1001-7178.20260429.002>.
- Zhang, Y., & Xue, F. (2022). "Front-end compensation" or "back-end incentives"? A study on the default of targeted normal school students against the backdrop of rural revitalization. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences Edition)*, 40(6), 44–56.
- Zhao, R., & Li, M. (2024). Practical dilemmas and optimization paths for rural-targeted public-funded teacher trainees' retention: Based on ERG theory. *Journal of Heilongjiang Teacher Development University*, 43(7), 10–14.
- Zhou, D., & Ma, K. (2024). Typology and enhancement strategies of rural-targeted public-funded teacher trainees' return intentions: Evidence from 2,514 students across eight provinces. *Journal of Suzhou University (Educational Science Edition)*, 12(3), 95–107.
- Zhu, X. (2023). The "Targeted Teacher Special Training Program" is a paradigmatic policy following the laws of teacher education. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (6), 9–12.