

Challenges of Rural Teacher Retention in the context of Public-funded Teacher Education Program in Rural China

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ABSTRACT

This study applies structural functionalism to examine China's public-funded teacher education program and its effectiveness in rural teacher retention. Drawing on policy documents and in-depth rural teacher interviews, it explores how policy mechanisms interact with individual motivations and institutional structures. Despite increasing teacher supply, the program fails to sustain motivation and professional growth, revealing a fundamental misalignment between policy goals and teachers' personal aspirations. From a functionalist perspective, this misalignment produces systemic dysfunction: organizational overload, weak integration, and diminished sense of belonging. Moreover, limited career pathways and inadequate institutional support reduce goal attainment and system stability. The study argues that retention policies should move beyond short-term staffing solutions toward holistic career development frameworks that strengthen teachers' professional identity and organizational commitment. By situating rural teacher retention within a systemic and functionalist framework, this research contributes to understanding the structural and motivational dynamics shaping the sustainability of China's rural education policies.

Keywords: Teacher Retention, Public-funded Teacher Education Program(PTEP), Rural Schools, Structural Functionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Rural education serves as a pivotal cornerstone in China's rural revitalization strategy, given that the quality and stability of rural teachers directly determine the effectiveness of educational equity and long-term social development (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Yet, rural schools across China, particularly in less-developed regions (e.g., the eastern, western, and northern parts of Guangdong Province), continue to face severe challenges in teacher retention. High turnover, inadequate professional development, limited resources, and difficult living conditions have become persistent obstacles that undermine the sustainability of rural education (Cheng et al., 2023).

In 2023, Guangdong Province issued the Education Action Plan for the "Hundreds of Counties, Thousands of Towns, Tens of Thousands of Villages High-Quality Development Project" (2023–2027), commonly referred to as the "Baiqianwan Project" (Guangdong Provincial Government, 2023). This project aims to narrow regional disparities, promote balanced development, and strengthen social integration. Education is identified as a central pillar, not only to improve equity but also to cultivate human capital for rural revitalization. Within this framework, "talent revitalization" has been emphasized as a key dimension, directly linking teacher training and retention with community development, industrial upgrading, and social stability.

One of the core policy instruments to address rural teacher shortages in China is the PTEP for undergraduates.

In Guangdong Province, this policy has been locally institutionalized through the Notice on Launching the 2018 Pilot Program of Public-funded Targeted Teacher Education for Primary and Secondary Schools in Eastern, Western, and Northern Guangdong (Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2018), and further standardized by the implementation measures for the PTEP for Primary and Secondary Schools in Eastern, Western, and Northern Guangdong (Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2020). These policies require selected pre-service teachers to accept tuition-free training and serve in designated rural schools upon graduation, with the aim of ensuring a stable supply of qualified rural teachers. However, despite these institutional commitments, the extent to which PTEP can effectively improve teacher retention remains uncertain, as rural teachers continue to face persistent challenges related to teaching conditions, professional development, workload, and personal well-being.

This situation reveals the central problem of why the PTEP, despite increasing teacher supply, fails to ensure sustainable teacher retention in rural China. Existing studies have examined rural teacher attrition and retention factors, but the literature lacks a holistic, systemic analysis that connects macro-level policy objectives with micro-level teacher experiences and meso-level institutional structures. To bridge this gap, this study employs structural functionalism (Parsons, 1951; Merton, 1968) as an analytical framework. By adopting this framework, the paper aims to contribute by theoretically explicating the systemic dysfunctions—misalignments between policy functions (e.g., supply adaptation) and teacher needs (e.g., professional growth, belonging)—that undermine retention, and by offering integrated policy implications within the evolving "Baiqianwan Project" context.

To investigate these issues, the research draws on qualitative data collected from interviews with rural teachers, school administrators, and a university lecturer in Guangdong Province, complemented by document analysis of provincial policy files and local reports. It focuses on the challenges rural teachers face in remaining in their positions and examines how these challenges reflect broader structural tensions within the education system. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges rural teachers face in remaining in their positions under current PTEP and rural revitalization policies?
2. How can these challenges be explained through the lens of structural functionalism?
3. What implications do the findings hold for improving rural teacher education and retention within the Baiqianwan Project framework?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes not only to the theoretical understanding of rural teacher retention but also to the practical improvement of policies, thereby supporting the high-quality development of rural education in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the existing research on teacher retention and attrition, PTEP, rural revitalization and educational equity, and the application of structural functionalism. Together, these strands provide the conceptual and empirical foundation for the present study.

Teacher Retention and Attrition: Global and Chinese Perspectives

Teacher retention has been widely studied in international scholarship. Ingersoll (2001) highlighted that teacher turnover is not merely an individual issue but an organizational one, shaped by working conditions, administrative support, and resource allocation. (Guarino et al., 2006) further reviewed empirical studies and found that low salaries, limited career opportunities, and poor working conditions are significant predictors of attrition. More recent meta-analysis and systematic review evidence also confirms that supportive professional environments and teachers' sense of value and recognition are crucial determinants of long-term retention across different countries (Nguyen, Pham, Springer, & Crouch, 2020).

In China, the problem of rural teacher attrition is particularly pronounced. Liu and Onwuegbuzie (2012) found that Chinese teachers' work stress strongly predicted turnover intentions. Liu, Liu, and Wang (2022) found that limited professional development opportunities and weak school support systems were major barriers to retaining young rural teachers. Using grounded theory and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (FsQCA), Cheng et al. (2023) identified multiple critical conditions: welfare, emotional support, work environment, and professional identity. Their findings show that these factors jointly shape rural teachers' decisions to remain. Applying Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, Jiang et al. (2023) confirmed that both hygiene factors (e.g., salary, housing) and motivation factors (e.g., recognition, professional growth) significantly reduce turnover intention among rural teachers, although motivation factors exerted a stronger influence.

Together, these studies indicate that teacher retention cannot be explained by single variables but must be understood as an interaction between organizational structures, personal identity, and broader social-economic contexts. This perspective aligns with a structural functionalist approach, which views teacher retention as a systemic issue embedded in the broader education and social structure.

PTEP in China

One of the major policy instruments addressing rural teacher shortages in China is the PTEP, launched in 2007. Under this policy, students receive tuition-free teacher training on the condition that they serve in designated rural schools after graduation. A decade-long policy review by Liu and Yuan (2022) found that although the initiative has expanded the supply of qualified teachers, persistent issues remain, including mismatches between training majors and actual school needs, insufficient incentive mechanisms, and limited opportunities for career advancement. Li, Zhang, and Fu (2022) highlighted that although the program has expanded the supply of rural teachers, its long-term retention effectiveness is limited: teachers' subjective social class and sense of professional identity significantly shape their intention to stay, suggesting that retention involves both material and symbolic dimensions.

These findings suggest that while PTEP may fulfill the quantitative function of adaptation (i.e., increasing teacher supply), it struggles to address qualitative dimensions such as motivation, professional identity, and long-term development—issues that structural functionalism conceptualizes as goal attainment, integration, and latency.

Rural Revitalization and Educational Equity

Teacher retention is closely linked to the broader strategy of rural revitalization in China. Education is recognized as a cornerstone of rural development because it provides human capital, promotes social equity, and sustains community cohesion (Xue, Li, & Li, 2021). The Baiqianwan Project explicitly emphasizes education as a key pillar (Guangdong Provincial Government, 2023). The policy highlights "talent revitalization" as a crucial dimension, directly linking teacher training and retention with rural development goals.

Empirical research supports this emphasis. Studies show that rural teachers play not only instructional roles but also community-building functions, acting as cultural transmitters, social organizers, and role models (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Yet, inequities in living conditions, infrastructure, and career pathways create persistent structural barriers. Recent research on teacher resilience in rural Chinese schools demonstrates that cultural identity, community support, and work-life balance are critical in sustaining teachers' commitment, further showing that retention is not solely an economic issue but also a sociocultural one (Sun et al., 2024).

By situating teacher retention within the broader context of rural revitalization and the Baiqianwan Project, this study underscores that rural education policies must address both systemic inequalities and individual well-being to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Structural Functionalism as an Analytical Framework

Structural functionalism, developed by Parsons (1951, 1961), provides a systemic perspective for analyzing education. According to Parsons' AGIL model, every social system must fulfill four functions: Adaptation (A),

securing external resources and responding to environmental demands; Goal attainment (G), defining and pursuing collective objectives; Integration (I), coordinating and regulating relationships among members; and Latency (L), maintaining cultural patterns and sustaining long-term commitment. Figure 1 below shows the analytical framework based on structural functionalism.

Merton (1968) extended this framework by introducing the concept of dysfunction, recognizing that social institutions may produce unintended negative consequences. This addition is particularly relevant for analyzing policy implementation, where the gap between intentions and outcomes can undermine systemic stability.

Contemporary scholars have applied structural functionalism in education research to explain teacher professional development, school governance, and systemic challenges (Shaoan, Namanyane, Feng, & Arif, 2024; Mu, 2024). Recent studies further resonate with functionalist concerns, showing how systemic supports or their absence affect teacher motivation and retention in rural schools (Sargent & Hannum, 2009).

Therefore, structural functionalism offers a valuable lens for examining complex educational issues, such as rural teacher retention, by providing a framework to connect macro-level policy structures with micro-level outcomes. Its concepts of function and dysfunction are particularly apt for evaluating the systemic successes and failures of programs like the PTEP.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analytical Framework

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges of rural teacher retention under the PTEP in Guangdong Province. Teacher retention is a complex phenomenon shaped by institutional policies, school contexts, and individual experiences. A qualitative approach was therefore considered appropriate to capture participants' perceptions and life experiences. A case study strategy was adopted, focusing on Zhanjiang, a city in western Guangdong that is both representative of rural education challenges and a key area within the Baiqianwan Project.

To guide data collection and analysis, this study utilized an analytical framework grounded in structural functionalism, specifically Parsons' AGIL schema and Merton's concept of dysfunction. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework posits that for the rural education system (centered on the PTEP) to maintain stability, it must fulfill four essential functions: Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Latency (L). The framework also anticipates that imbalances or tensions within and between these functions can lead to systemic dysfunctions, which manifest as the retention challenges explored in this study. This framework served as a sensitizing tool during thematic analysis, helping to categorize teachers' experiences into how the system succeeds or fails in its functional imperatives. Figure 1 below shows the analytical framework based on structural functionalism.

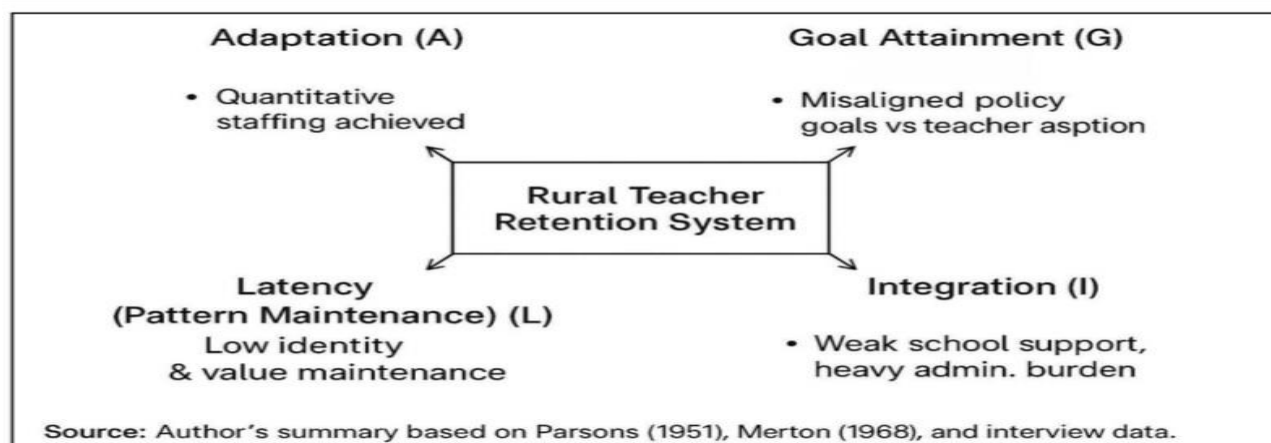


Figure 1. Analytical Framework Based on Structural Functionalism Participants and Sampling

Three groups of participants were included in this study: (1) rural teachers who were graduates of the PTEP program and currently teaching in rural schools, (2) school administrators from these rural schools, and (3) a university lecturer specializing in rural education policy.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research problem. The specific selection criteria were as follows:

1. For rural teachers (n=8): Participants were required to (a) be PTEP graduates, (b) have 2 to 4 years of teaching experience to capture varying career stages, and (c) be employed in rural schools located in the eastern, western, or northern regions of Guangdong Province.
2. For school administrators (n=2): They were selected from schools that employed PTEP-graduate teachers, ensuring their direct involvement in teacher management and support.
3. For the university lecturer (n=1): Selection was based on their expertise in rural education policy and teacher training.

Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, which was determined when subsequent interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights relevant to the research questions. The demographic characteristics of the final participant sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant Group	Number	Region (Guangdong)
Rural Teachers	8	East, West, North
School Administrators	2	West, North
University Lecturer	1	Province-wide
Total	11	—

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and July 2025. Each 45–90 minute interview (face-to-face or online) was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocols were tailored to each participant group but centered on core topics: working conditions, professional development, organizational support, and policy implementation. Secondary data included policy documents such as the Baiqianwan Project Education Action Plan to provide contextual background.

The interview data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis in six phases: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. NVivo software aided this process. The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while the structural functionalist framework provided a lens for interpreting the themes.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Credibility was ensured through triangulation across participant groups, peer debriefing, and member checking with selected participants. An audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions and enhance transparency.

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

FINDINGS

This section presents the major challenges that rural teachers face in remaining in their positions, based on qualitative data collected from interviews with rural teachers, school administrators, and university lecturer in Guangdong Province. The findings are organized using Parsons' structural-functional framework (AGIL), which highlights both the intended functions and dysfunctions of rural teacher education and retention policies.

Adaptation: Teaching and Resource Challenges

The function of adaptation refers to a social subsystem's capacity to secure resources and respond to external demands (Parsons, 1961). In the context of rural schools in Guangdong, adaptation is closely tied to the shortage of qualified teachers and instructional resources.

Although the PTEP has alleviated some shortages, teachers reported that their daily workload remains overwhelming. Many rural schools still face the challenge of multi-grade or cross-subject teaching, where a single teacher is responsible for several subjects simultaneously. As one teacher explained:

"We often have to teach multiple subjects. In my school, I am responsible for both math and science, even though my training was in mathematics. The shortage of specialized teachers forces us to cover other areas."

Another teacher highlighted how resource constraints exacerbate teaching difficulties:

"The types and quantity of books in the school library are limited, making it difficult to meet students' diverse reading needs. It is also hard to organize large-scale reading activities."

Such accounts illustrate how adaptation is only partially fulfilled. The PTEP provides a steady flow of new teachers, but without adequate teaching materials, facilities, and subject balance, the system struggles to meet students' learning needs. Teachers' frustration also indicates the presence of dysfunctions, as the system adapts quantitatively by supplying teachers, it fails to adapt qualitatively to ensure effective teaching.

Goal Attainment: Limited Professional Development and Motivation

The second function of a social system is goal attainment, which requires defining and pursuing collective objectives. In rural education, this corresponds to the policy goal of improving teacher quality and sustaining motivation for professional growth.

However, interviewees consistently described a lack of opportunities and motivation for professional development. Teachers noted that training workshops were infrequent, often superficial, and rarely tailored to rural contexts. As one teacher put it:

"I don't really think about professional development. I just finish my daily work, and gradually my willpower is worn down, leaving me with little motivation to continue."

Another teacher described the discouraging absence of recognition:

"Sometimes I feel that no matter how much effort I put into teaching, it goes unnoticed. Without feedback or encouragement, it is hard to stay motivated."

School administrators also acknowledged the problem. A headmaster observed:

"We want to support teachers' professional development, but limited funding and resources make it difficult. Many rural teachers feel stagnant in their careers and lack opportunities for advancement."

These narratives suggest a significant gap between the collective policy goal of strengthening the rural teaching force and the realities of teachers' everyday experiences. Without structured pathways for professional growth, teachers' morale and motivation decline, which weakens the goal attainment function of rural education.

Integration: Weak School Management and Belonging

Integration refers to the coordination of a system's components and the regulation of relationships among its members (Parsons, 1951). In schools, this function is realized through effective management, supportive leadership, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging.

Yet, the data reveal that integration is often weak in rural schools. Several teachers complained about excessive administrative burdens that distracted from teaching. For example, one teacher stated:

"There are too many non-teaching tasks, such as filling in forms, writing reports, and preparing for inspections. Sometimes I feel I spend more time on paperwork than on my students."

Others highlighted the lack of collective identity and collegial support. A university lecturer, who has conducted fieldwork in rural schools, remarked:

"Many rural teachers lack a strong sense of belonging to their schools. They often feel isolated, which undermines both their performance and their willingness to stay."

This deficiency in integration weakens the school's ability to retain teachers. When teachers feel disconnected from their colleagues and unsupported by administrators, their commitment to the institution diminishes. This, in turn, results in an unstable teaching workforce and a fragmented educational community.

Latency: Personal Life Constraints and Value Maintenance

Latency, or pattern maintenance, refers to the system's ability to preserve cultural values and sustain individuals' long-term commitment over time. For rural teachers, this involves balancing professional responsibilities with personal life, and maintaining their sense of purpose and identity as educators.

However, teachers repeatedly pointed out personal life constraints that made long-term retention difficult. Challenges included inadequate medical services, separation from family members, lack of entertainment facilities, and difficulties in arranging education for their own children. One teacher commented:

"The living conditions here are harsh. There are few facilities, and my family is far away. Over time, it becomes more difficult to stay motivated."

Another teacher described the pressure of comparison with urban peers:

"When I see my classmates working in cities, with better pay and living standards, I start to question whether staying here is worthwhile."

These struggles weaken the latent function of rural education. Teachers may begin with strong professional ideals, but over time, personal hardships erode their commitment, ultimately leading to attrition.

Dysfunction: Gaps between Policy and Practice

While PTEP aims to stabilize the rural teaching workforce, dysfunctions are evident in its implementation. Merton (1968) emphasized that social systems can produce dysfunctions when intended outcomes are undermined by practical constraints.

In this study, dysfunctions manifested in several ways. First, the distribution of teachers across subjects remained imbalanced. A school principal explained:

"We can recruit Chinese and math teachers through the program, but for art or special education, the vacancies remain unfilled."

Second, retention incentives were inadequate. Teachers noted that salary levels, housing support, and promotion opportunities were limited compared to their urban counterparts. As one teacher observed:

"The program got me here, but there is little to keep me here. Without better pay or opportunities, many of us consider leaving."

Finally, administrative implementation was sometimes rigid. A university lecturer noted:

"Policies may appear theoretically sound, but in practice, local schools lack the flexibility and resources to make them work effectively."

These dysfunctions underscore the structural tensions between policy ambitions and local realities. Without systemic adjustments, the goals of the Baiqianwan Project risk being only partially fulfilled.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges of rural teacher retention under the PTEP in Guangdong Province, focusing on interview data from rural teachers, school administrators, and university lecturer. Through the lens of structural functionalism, the findings reveal systemic tensions and institutional shortcomings that complicate the retention of rural teachers. This section discusses the findings in relation to the AGIL framework (Parsons, 1951, 1961), the concept of dysfunction (Merton, 1968), and existing literature, before highlighting policy implications for the Baiqianwan Project.

Adaptation: Material Conditions and Resource Allocation

The function of adaptation refers to how the education system secures resources to meet external demands. While the PTEP has increased the supply of rural teachers, adaptation remains problematic in terms of material conditions. Participants consistently pointed to inadequate salaries, limited subsidies, and poor living environments. These challenges impair teachers' ability to adapt to rural settings and make teaching positions less attractive.

This echoes international research that highlights low compensation and difficult working conditions as primary reasons for teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Guarino et al., 2006). In China, Liu and Onwuegbuzie (2012) similarly found that stress linked to resource shortages predicts turnover intentions. More recent studies confirm that hygiene factors such as housing and medical care are decisive for rural teacher retention (Jiang et al., 2023). In the context of the Baiqianwan Project, failure to address these adaptation issues risks undermining broader rural development objectives.

However, our findings reveal a deeper contradiction: the policy's approach to adaptation is fundamentally imbalanced. It addresses the human resource deficit in isolation while neglecting the material and systemic supports required for those resources to function effectively. This creates a critical dysfunction, not merely a shortfall. The requirement for multi-subject teaching, for instance, is an unexpected finding that transcends simple workload issues. It points to a systemic failure to align teacher specialization with school needs, ultimately undermining educational quality and teacher self-efficacy. This misalignment resonates with resource dependency theory, which posits that organizations require a bundle of resources to thrive. The PTEP's narrow focus on one resource (teachers) while ignoring others (specialized materials, balanced assignments) reveals a flawed theory of change within the policy itself.

Goal Attainment: Policy Objectives versus Personal Aspirations

Goal attainment refers to the ability of the system to set and achieve collective objectives. The PTEP aims to ensure a stable rural teaching force, but the findings suggest a misalignment between policy objectives and teachers' personal aspirations. Many teachers expressed limited motivation for professional development, perceiving few opportunities for career progression in rural schools.

A review of the tuition-free teacher education initiative found that although the program significantly increased teacher numbers, the long-term retention outcomes remain modest, as subjective social class perceptions and professional identity strongly mediate teachers' willingness to stay (Li, Zhang, & Fu, 2022). The disjunction between state objectives and teachers' professional goals produces what Merton (1968) would call a dysfunction: unintended consequences that weaken system effectiveness. In this case, while the program succeeds in staffing rural schools, it inadvertently fosters low morale and disengagement.

Cheng et al. (2023) emphasize that professional identity is a core condition for retention. Without structured pathways for growth, teachers struggle to align their aspirations with policy goals. To ensure goal attainment, retention policies must not only place teachers in schools but also support their long-term career trajectories and professional fulfillment.

Integration: Organizational Support and Belonging

Integration concerns the regulation of relationships within the system. The findings reveal weak organizational support, heavy administrative burdens, and a limited sense of belonging among rural teachers. School administrators often require teachers to perform non-teaching tasks, leaving them overextended and isolated.

This resonates with Sargent and Hannum's (2009) findings that rural Chinese teachers often face professional learning challenges due to limited institutional support. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) found that weak school-level organizational commitment and inadequate fit between teachers and school context hinder retention. International studies also highlight organizational support as central to integration and retention (Guarino et al., 2006).

From a functionalist perspective, weak integration erodes system stability. Teachers' diminished sense of belonging and organizational identity reflect a form of dysfunction: policies designed to stabilize the workforce may actually contribute to alienation. Addressing integration requires reducing administrative burdens, enhancing collegial collaboration, and fostering collective identity within rural schools.

Latency: Cultural Values, Motivation, and Resilience

Latency refers to the maintenance of cultural patterns and motivational commitment. Findings show that rural teachers experience a gradual erosion of motivation and a weakening of professional identity. Several teachers described feelings of stagnation, loss of purpose, and psychological strain.

Recent research highlights the importance of resilience and cultural identity for sustaining rural teachers. For instance, the 2024 study on teacher resilience in rural Chinese schools found that work-life balance and cultural support are critical for maintaining long-term commitment (Sun et al., 2024). Cheng et al. (2023) also showed that emotional support plays a key role in reinforcing teachers' professional identity.

The weakening of latency functions illustrates a long-term risk: if cultural and motivational resources are not replenished, teachers may comply with contractual obligations but disengage from meaningful teaching practices. For the Baiqianwan Project, sustaining rural teachers requires reinforcing cultural recognition, building community support networks, and promoting positive professional identities.

Dysfunction and Unintended Consequences

Merton's (1968) concept of dysfunction helps explain why well-intentioned policies may fail. The PTEP has addressed teacher shortages quantitatively but has created unintended side effects: limited mobility, frustration with professional ceilings, and disconnection from urban peers. Rather than stabilizing the system, these outcomes produce latent instability.

This aligns with Li, Zhang, and Fu (2022), who showed that subjective social class affects teachers' willingness to remain in rural schools. When teachers perceive themselves as disadvantaged or excluded, policies may exacerbate inequality rather than mitigate it.

Policy Implications for the Baiqianwan Project

The findings carry several implications for rural education policy within the Baiqianwan Project framework:

1. **Improve adaptation:** Provide competitive compensation, housing, and medical support to enhance teachers' ability to adapt to rural contexts.
2. **Ensure goal attainment:** Align state objectives with teachers' career aspirations by offering clear professional development pathways and promotion opportunities.
3. **Strengthen integration:** Reduce administrative burdens, expand collegial collaboration, and build school cultures of belonging.
4. **Reinforce latency:** Support teachers' resilience through cultural recognition programs, structured mentoring systems, and community engagement initiatives.

By addressing these dimensions simultaneously, the Baiqianwan Project can better achieve its aim of revitalizing rural education and ensuring sustainable teacher retention.

SUMMARY

In summary, the discussion shows that structural functionalism provides a useful framework for analyzing rural teacher retention. While the PTEP fulfills certain systemic functions, it also produces dysfunctions that undermine its effectiveness. Addressing these contradictions requires a comprehensive policy approach that integrates material, professional, organizational, and cultural dimensions. This analysis contributes to both the theoretical understanding and the practical improvement of rural teacher policies in China.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study examined the challenges of rural teacher retention in Guangdong Province under the PTEP, drawing on qualitative interviews with rural teachers, school administrators, and university scholars. By applying structural functionalism, particularly Parsons' AGIL framework and Merton's concept of dysfunction, the analysis revealed how material, professional, organizational, and cultural dimensions interact to shape teacher retention.

The findings demonstrate that while the PTEP has succeeded in staffing rural schools, it has not resolved fundamental retention challenges. Teachers face inadequate salaries and poor living conditions (adaptation), limited professional development opportunities (goal attainment), weak organizational support and belonging (integration), and declining motivation and professional identity (latency). Moreover, these shortcomings illustrate dysfunctions, whereby policies designed to stabilize the system inadvertently produce alienation and instability.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the continued relevance of structural functionalism in contemporary education research. By mapping the challenges of rural teacher retention onto the AGIL framework, the study shows that retention is not simply an individual decision but a systemic phenomenon. The integration of dysfunction highlights how well-intentioned policies may produce unintended negative consequences. This extends the application of functionalist theory to the study of teacher labor markets in transitional contexts within China.

Practically, the study offers insights for the implementation of the Baiqianwan Project. Addressing retention requires simultaneous attention to all four systemic functions: improving material support, aligning career

pathways with policy goals, strengthening organizational integration, and reinforcing cultural and motivational resilience. Policies should not only increase the number of rural teachers but also ensure their well-being, professional growth, and long-term commitment. These lessons are critical for achieving the broader goal of rural revitalization in China.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design, with a small sample size ($n=11$) focused on Zhanjiang City, limits the statistical generalizability of the findings, although data saturation was achieved. The results may not fully represent the diverse socio-economic contexts across China. Second, the primary reliance on interview data, while policy documents were consulted for context, means the analysis centers on grassroots experiences. This approach may overlook nuances in policy design and intent at higher administrative levels. Third, as the research involves critical examination of government policy, the authors' positions within the education system present a potential for unconscious bias, despite efforts to ensure objectivity through triangulation. These limitations point to clear avenues for future research.

Future studies should seek to validate these findings with larger, more diverse samples across multiple provinces. Longitudinal research is critically needed to track the career trajectories of PTEP teachers over time. Furthermore, a dedicated analysis of policy documents would provide a crucial top-down perspective to complement the bottom-up views captured here. Finally, investigating the perspectives of students and parents would offer a more holistic understanding of the ecosystem impacted by teacher turnover.

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