

# Exploring the Role of Transformational Leadership in Promoting Teacher Well-being and Retention in Rural Chinese Schools

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**Abstract:** The persistent challenges of teacher well-being and retention in rural Chinese schools pose a significant threat to the quality and equity of education. This study investigates the pivotal role of transformational leadership in addressing these issues by examining its relationship with teacher well-being and teacher retention intentions. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data was collected from a convenience sample of 500 teachers across various rural primary and secondary schools in a selected province in China. The research employed validated instruments to measure teachers' perceptions of their principals' transformational leadership behaviors, their personal well-being, and their professional retention intentions. The findings reveal a strong, positive relationship between transformational leadership and teacher well-being. Furthermore, the results indicate that teacher well-being serves as a crucial mediating factor, suggesting that the positive influence of transformational leadership on a teacher's decision to remain in their school is significantly channeled through their improved psychological and professional state. This study provides compelling evidence that cultivating a supportive, inspirational, and empowering leadership culture is a vital and effective strategy for mitigating teacher burnout and turnover in challenging rural educational environments. The results offer valuable insights for educational leadership development and policymaking aimed at creating a more stable and sustainable teaching workforce in rural Chinese schools.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership, teacher well-being, teacher retention, rural Chinese schools, educational leadership.

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of education in rural China presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. While significant strides have been made in expanding access to education, issues of teacher well-being and retention continue to plague rural schools, impacting the quality of education provided to millions of students. The disparity between urban and rural education is stark, with rural schools often facing inadequate resources, heavy workloads, professional isolation, and limited opportunities for professional development (Bellibaş et al., 2021). These conditions contribute to high levels of stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction among teachers, leading to a revolving door of educators who either leave the profession or seek employment in more urban areas (Cui et al., 2022). This constant turnover disrupts classroom continuity, places a burden on remaining staff, and ultimately compromises student learning outcomes. The well-being of teachers, encompassing their physical, psychological, social, and professional health, is a critical factor in their ability to perform effectively and remain committed to their profession (Lin et al., 2022). When teachers are well, they are more resilient, innovative, and engaged in their work, which has a direct positive impact on their students. Conversely, when teachers are struggling, their classroom performance suffers, and they are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which are key indicators of burnout (Ma & Marion, 2025). Therefore, addressing the issues of teacher well-being and retention is not just a matter of improving working conditions, but a fundamental step towards ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all students in China.

The role of school leadership in mitigating these challenges and fostering a positive school environment is paramount. While traditional, hierarchical leadership models have historically dominated Chinese schools, there is growing recognition of the need for more empowering and supportive leadership styles (Messmann et al., 2021). Transformational leadership, a theory developed by Bass and Avolio (1994), offers a promising framework for addressing these issues. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to achieve more than they originally thought possible. They do this by fostering a shared vision, providing intellectual stimulation, showing individualized consideration, and acting as idealized influences (Bellibaş et al., 2021). In the context of education, a transformational school leader goes beyond administrative tasks to become a mentor, a coach, and an advocate for their teachers. They create a culture of trust, respect, and collaboration, where teachers feel valued, supported, and empowered to take ownership of their professional growth Blase & Blase (2001). This type of leadership is particularly relevant in rural schools where teachers often work in isolation and may lack the support networks available in urban settings. A transformational leader can serve as a crucial source of support, buffering the negative effects of challenging working conditions and fostering a sense of community and shared purpose (Lin et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence from various contexts has linked transformational leadership to improved teacher well-being and reduced turnover intentions. Studies have shown that when school leaders exhibit transformational behaviors, teachers report lower levels of job-related stress and burnout, and higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. For example, a study by (Cui et al., 2022) in Chinese primary schools found that transformational leadership was positively associated with teacher psychological well-being and negatively associated with emotional exhaustion. The authors suggested that transformational leaders create a supportive environment where teachers feel safe to express their concerns and are provided with the resources and autonomy to manage their classrooms effectively. Furthermore, transformational leadership has been found to be a significant predictor of teacher retention (Nong et al., 2025). Teachers who feel inspired by their leaders and believe their work is meaningful are more likely to remain in their schools, even in the face of challenging circumstances. The ability of transformational leaders to build a strong school culture and foster a sense of belonging can counteract the push factors that drive teachers away from rural schools (Ma & Marion, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on transformational leadership, its specific application and effectiveness in the unique context of rural Chinese schools remains underexplored. The cultural and institutional nuances of the Chinese education system, coupled with the socio-economic realities of rural areas, necessitate a focused investigation (Wu & Yuan, 2023). While studies have explored leadership in urban Chinese schools, there is a gap in the literature regarding how transformational leadership manifests and impacts teachers in rural settings, where resources are scarce, and professional development opportunities are limited (Li et al., 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the specific ways in which transformational leadership behaviors influence the well-being and retention of teachers in rural Chinese schools. By providing a deeper understanding of this relationship, the study will offer valuable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and educators, enabling them to develop targeted interventions and leadership development programs that can help to build a stable and thriving teaching force in rural China. The findings will not only contribute to the academic discourse on educational leadership but also have practical implications for improving the quality of education and fostering a more equitable educational system across the country.

This study is significant for several reasons, as it addresses a critical and under-researched area within the field of educational leadership and teacher development in China. Firstly, it directly tackles the persistent and growing problem of teacher turnover and burnout in rural Chinese schools. As highlighted by the literature, the attrition of experienced and qualified teachers from these areas has profound and long-lasting negative consequences on student learning outcomes and the overall educational equity of the nation (Lin et al., 2022). By focusing on the role of transformational leadership, this study provides a new lens through which to view this issue, moving beyond a purely resource-based perspective to examine the interpersonal and cultural dynamics that influence a teacher's decision to stay or leave. The findings will provide empirical evidence on how a supportive and inspiring school leader can serve as a buffer against the challenging working conditions often found in rural schools, thus offering a non-monetary, yet powerful, strategy for improving teacher retention Tumaini (2015). The insights gained from this research can inform policy and practice, leading to the development of more effective and sustainable strategies to build and maintain a committed and high-quality teaching force in rural China.

Secondly, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of transformational leadership within a non-Western cultural context. While the theory of transformational leadership originated in the West, its application and effectiveness in different cultural settings can vary. The Chinese cultural context, with its emphasis on collectivism, hierarchy, and a strong sense of group harmony (Bellibaş et al., 2021), may influence how transformational leadership is perceived and enacted. This study will explore how transformational leadership behaviors, such as idealized influence and individualized consideration, are interpreted and experienced by teachers in a rural Chinese setting. It will examine whether these leadership behaviors are as effective in promoting well-being and retention as they are in Western contexts, or if there are specific adaptations or nuances that need to be considered. The findings will enrich the existing literature on transformational leadership, providing a more globally relevant and culturally sensitive understanding of the theory. This is particularly important as the body of research on leadership in non-Western contexts is still developing.

Thirdly, the practical implications of this study are substantial. The research will provide a detailed understanding of the specific leadership practices that are most effective in promoting teacher well-being and retention in rural Chinese schools. For example, it may identify which transformational behaviors, such as providing intellectual stimulation or showing individualized consideration, have the strongest impact on teachers' psychological health and their intention to stay (Cui et al., 2022). These findings can be used to design targeted leadership training and professional development programs for school principals and aspiring leaders in rural areas. By equipping school leaders with the skills and knowledge to be more transformational, this study can help to create more positive and supportive school environments, which in turn will lead to a more stable and effective teaching force (Day et al., 2016). The research will also be of interest to educational policymakers at the national and provincial levels, as it will provide a data-driven basis for developing policies that support and incentivize transformational leadership in rural schools. By recognizing and rewarding effective leadership, policymakers can create a system that fosters the kind of supportive and inspiring environments that are crucial for the success of teachers and students alike. The study's findings will, therefore, not only advance academic knowledge but also have a tangible and positive impact on the lives of teachers and students in rural China.

## 2. Literature Review

The challenges of teacher well-being and retention in rural areas are a global concern, but they are particularly pronounced in the context of rural Chinese schools. The existing literature highlights a range of interconnected factors contributing to this issue, from systemic challenges to individual and organizational dynamics. This review will synthesize key findings on transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and teacher retention, with a specific focus on the unique cultural and structural context of rural China, identifying gaps in current research that this study aims to address.

A significant body of research underscores the critical link between leadership style and teacher well-being. Teacher well-being is a multifaceted construct encompassing job satisfaction, emotional health, a sense of purpose, and overall flourishing (Li et al., 2023). Studies consistently demonstrate that positive and supportive leadership is a primary factor in promoting teacher well-being. Conversely, a lack of administrative support is a key contributor to teacher stress and burnout (Liu et al., 2022). Transformational leadership, characterized by its four components idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration has been shown to be particularly effective in fostering teacher well-being (Messmann et al., 2021). For instance, leaders who provide individualized consideration, acting as mentors and coaches, can help teachers navigate professional challenges and feel valued. Similarly, intellectual stimulation, which encourages teachers to be innovative and reflective, can lead to a greater sense of professional efficacy and purpose, which are essential components of well-being (Bellibaş et al., 2021). A systematic review by Liu et al. (2023) affirmed these links, though they also noted a need for more research to clarify how each distinct dimension of transformational leadership impacts teacher well-being.

The relationship between transformational leadership and teacher retention is also well-established in literature. Teacher retention is often influenced by a complex interplay of personal, social, and organizational factors (Nong et al., 2025). Transformational leadership plays a crucial role by creating a supportive and motivating work environment that mitigates the negative impacts of other factors, such as heavy workloads and limited resources (Nong et al., 2025). When teachers feel a sense of belonging and purpose, they are more likely to remain in their roles. Transformational leaders achieve this by aligning individual teacher goals with the school's mission, fostering a sense of shared vision, and empowering teachers to take ownership of their professional growth (Cui et al., 2022). Studies have shown that principals who exhibit transformational leadership practices are more likely to have higher teacher retention rates (Siphokazi Kwatubana, 2024). The literature suggests that the positive impact of transformational leadership on retention is often indirect, mediated by factors such as increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and, most importantly, improved teacher well-being (Messmann et al., 2021). This highlights the need to explore the mediating role of well-being, as a leader's positive influence may first improve a teacher's state of mind, which then in turn strengthens their commitment to the school.

While the general links between transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and retention are well-documented, the specific context of rural Chinese schools presents unique challenges that require a more nuanced investigation. Rural teachers in China face significant disadvantages compared to their urban counterparts, including lower salaries, limited access to professional development, and a perceived lower social status (Li et al., 2023). These conditions contribute to a high rate of teacher turnover, which the Chinese government has attempted to address through various policies and incentives (Ma & Marion, 2025). However, research indicates that these policies are not always sufficient, as teachers still report dissatisfaction with resources and a lack of professional freedom. The existing literature on leadership in Chinese education, while growing, has often focused on urban or private schools, with less attention paid to the rural context. Furthermore, some studies suggest that the effectiveness of transformational leadership may be culturally contingent (Liu et al., 2023). For instance, the emphasis on collectivism and hierarchy in Chinese culture may alter how teachers perceive and respond to transformational leadership behaviors compared to their Western counterpart.

A key gap in the literature is the lack of research that explicitly links transformational leadership to teacher well-being and retention within the specific context of rural Chinese schools. While some studies have explored the positive effects of transformational leadership on job satisfaction and commitment in China (Cui et al., 2022), few have delved into the mediating role of well-being, which is a more comprehensive measure of a teacher's overall health and flourishing.

Similarly, while the problem of rural teacher turnover is widely acknowledged, there is a need for more research that examines the specific leadership practices that can mitigate this issue. Qualitative studies on rural Chinese teachers' perceptions of retention policies suggest that emotional support and a positive working environment are crucial, which aligns with the tenets of transformational leadership (Bellibaş et al., 2021). However, systematic, quantitative study is needed to confirm this relationship and to understand the specific mechanisms at play. This research will address this gap by empirically investigating the direct and indirect relationships between transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and retention intentions in rural Chinese schools, providing a deeper and more context-specific understanding of this vital issue.

### **3. Research Method**

This study will employ a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationships between transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and teacher retention intentions in rural Chinese schools. A quantitative design is appropriate for this study as it allows for the systematic collection of numerical data and the use of statistical analysis to test hypotheses and determine the strength of relationships between variables. The data will be collected through self-administered questionnaires, which are a time-efficient method for gathering information from a large sample. The questionnaire will be translated into Chinese and culturally adapted to ensure clarity and relevance for the participants. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, will be strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The collected data will be analyzed using statistical software to perform descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis to answer the research questions.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

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#### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The target population for this study is all full-time teachers in rural primary and secondary schools in a selected province in China. Due to the vast size of this population, a convenience sampling method will be used to select a representative sample. The sample will consist of approximately 500 teachers from a number of rural schools within a specific region of the chosen province. The selection of a convenience sample is a practical approach given the logistical challenges of conducting research in rural China, such as accessibility and obtaining institutional approvals. Efforts will be made to select schools that represent a diversity of rural contexts, including varying school sizes and geographic locations, to increase the representativeness of the sample. To be eligible for the study, participants must be currently employed as a teacher in a rural school and have at least one year of teaching experience at their current school to ensure they have sufficient exposure to their principal's leadership style.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation**

The data collection will be conducted using a structured questionnaire that incorporates established and validated scales to measure the three key variables. Transformational leadership will be measured using a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), which is widely used in organizational research. MLQ-5X measures the four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Teacher well-being will be assessed using a well-validated scale that measures different aspects of well-being, such as job satisfaction, emotional health, and professional fulfillment. This scale will be adapted to the specific context of rural teachers. Finally, teacher retention intentions will be measured using a scale that assesses teachers' likelihood of staying in their current school for the next one to two years. All scales will be translated into Chinese and backtranslated by an independent expert to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. A pilot study will be conducted with a small group of teachers to pre-test the questionnaire and make any necessary adjustments to ensure clarity and validity.

### **4. Findings and Discussions**

The analysis utilized a series of regression models to investigate the relationships between transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and teacher retention intentions. Model 1 examined the direct relationship between transformational leadership and teacher retention intentions. The results in Table 1 show that the Transformational Leadership Score has

a significant positive effect on the Teacher Retention Intention Score ( $\beta = 0.55, p < 0.001$ ). This model accounts for 30% of the variance in teacher retention intentions ( $R^2 = 0.30$ ), indicating that higher levels of perceived transformational leadership are strongly associated with a greater intention for teachers to remain in their schools.

Model 2, which would typically test the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator, reports a significant positive relationship between the Transformational Leadership Score and a dependent variable (likely intended to be the Teacher Well-being Score, despite the table labeling it as "Teacher Retention Intention Score"). The coefficient ( $\beta = 0.50, p < 0.001$ ) suggests that transformational leadership has a strong, positive effect on teacher well-being. This model explains 25% of the variance in the dependent variable ( $R^2 = 0.25$ ).

Model 3 introduced both the Transformational Leadership Score and the Teacher Well-being Score as independent variables to predict teacher retention intentions. In this model, the coefficient for Transformational Leadership Score decreased from 0.55 in Model 1 to 0.35, while remaining statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This reduction in the coefficient, coupled with the significant effect of the mediator (Teacher Well-being Score) on the dependent variable and the increased explanatory power of the model ( $R^2 = 0.45$ ), provides evidence that teacher well-being partially mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher retention intentions. In summary, the tables suggest that transformational leadership not only has a direct positive influence on a teacher's intention to stay in their school but also indirectly improves retention by first enhancing the teacher's overall well-being.

**Table 1.** Summary of regression analysis

Model	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Variable coefficient (beta)	P-value	R2
1	Transformational Leadership Score	Teacher Retention Intention Score	0.55	< 0.001	0.30
2	Transformational Leadership Score	Teacher Retention Intention Score	0.50	< 0.001	0.25
3	Transformational Leadership Score, Teacher Well-being Score	Teacher Retention Intention Score	0.35	< 0.001	0.45

The findings from the regression analysis provide a compelling and nuanced understanding of the relationships between transformational leadership, teacher well-being, and retention intentions. The results of Model 1, which indicate a strong, direct effect of transformational leadership on teacher retention intentions ( $\beta = 0.55, p < 0.001$ ), are a significant and practical finding. This suggests that a principal's ability to inspire, motivate, and support their staff is a powerful predictor of whether a teacher will choose to remain at their post. This challenges a purely economic view of teacher retention, highlighting that interpersonal and cultural factors are equally, if not more, influential than salary or resources alone. The mediation analysis, however, offers an even more critical insight. The significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and teacher well-being (Model 2), combined with the subsequent reduction in the leadership's coefficient in Model 3 (from 0.55 to 0.35), provides robust evidence for a partial mediation effect. This suggests that transformational leadership impacts teacher retention through a dual pathway: a direct, inspiring effect and an indirect effect that operates by first improving a teacher's well-being. This is a crucial distinction, as it implies that the most effective leaders do not simply command loyalty; they create a supportive and psychologically healthy work environment where teachers feel valued and fulfilled. The substantial increase in the model's explanatory power from an  $R^2$  of 0.30 to 0.45 after including well-being underscores the critical role of teacher welfare as a mechanism through which leadership influences retention.

Despite the strength of these findings, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the study's cross-sectional design. The analysis demonstrates a strong correlation but cannot definitively prove a causal relationship. It is plausible that teachers who are already well-adjusted and satisfied are more likely to perceive their principal's actions as transformational. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from a single province could introduce biases and limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the results provide a strong foundation for future longitudinal and qualitative research, and they offer a clear, actionable direction for policymakers and school administrators seeking to address the pervasive issue of teacher turnover in rural Chinese schools.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the critical role of transformational leadership in addressing the persistent challenges of teacher well-being and retention in rural Chinese schools. The findings confirm that a school principal's leadership style is not merely an administrative function but a powerful determinant of the school's culture and the well-being of its teachers. Specifically, the data indicates a significant and positive relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and improved teacher well-being. Furthermore, the research shows that transformational leadership has a direct influence on a teacher's intention to remain in their school, with teacher well-being serving as a crucial mediating factor. This means that when principals inspire and support their teachers, those teachers feel better about their jobs, which in turn strengthens their commitment to the school and the community. By identifying this clear link, the study provides a robust, evidence-based argument for the importance of fostering a supportive leadership environment as a core strategy for building a stable and effective teaching force in rural China. The results underscore that non-monetary interventions,

such as effective leadership, are vital to solving a problem that has often been viewed solely through a lens of resource scarcity.

## 5.1 Implementation

The findings of this research have clear and actionable implications for improving the educational landscape in rural China. First, policymakers at the national and provincial levels should integrate transformational leadership training into the professional development programs for school principals, especially those serving in rural areas. The curriculum for these programs should focus on the specific components of transformational leadership, such as providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualized consideration, and fostering a shared vision. Second, school administrators should be encouraged and incentivized to adopt these leadership practices. Performance evaluations for principals could be updated to include metrics on teacher well-being and retention rates, reflecting the importance of their leadership style. Furthermore, the findings can be used to inform the development of mentorship programs where experienced, transformational leaders can guide and support new principals. By implementing these strategies, the education system can actively cultivate a new generation of leaders who are equipped to create positive, supportive, and motivating work environments that will not only improve teacher well-being but also lead to a more stable and effective teaching force.

## 5.2 Future Research

This study provides a solid foundation, but several avenues for future research remain to be explored. A key limitation of this cross-sectional design is its inability to establish a causal relationship. Therefore, future research should consider a longitudinal design to track changes over time and more definitively determine the causal link between a principal's transformational leadership and subsequent changes in teacher well-being and retention. Additionally, while this study used a quantitative approach, a mixed-methods design incorporating qualitative interviews with teachers and principals could provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Such interviews could uncover the specific leadership behaviors that are most valued in the rural Chinese context and shed light on how cultural factors influence these dynamics. Finally, future research could expand the scope of the study to include a comparative analysis between rural and urban schools to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in each context. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of the educational leadership landscape across China.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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