

# Challenges of Rural Teachers in China: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in a Rural Central Primary School in Guizhou Province

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## Abstract

Rural teachers are the foundation of a more equitable and higher-quality rural education in China, but teachers in rural areas face a variety of challenges in reality. This study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to examine the challenges of rural teachers in China. Based on the informal conversational interviews and observations of four teachers in a rural central primary school, this study identifies six major challenges, including heavy workload, political involvement, useless training, lack of a sense of belonging, problematic school management and leadership, and misbehaved students and uninvolved parents. These challenges are led by a combination of organizational (problematic school management and leadership), political (the unequal government-school relationship), and socioeconomic (the structural urban-rural inequality) factors. This study also suggests that teachers' participation in school management, improvement of principals' leadership practices, partnerships with the local community, decentralization of power from the government to schools, and mediation of the urban-rural inequality would help rural teachers to deal with their challenges.

## Keywords

Rural teachers; Challenges; Rural teachers in China; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

## 1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed policymakers and scholars' growing interest in rural teacher development in China. The number of K-12 full-time teachers in rural areas in China in 2019 is approximately 2.9 million, which nearly accounts for one-third of the total number of full-time teachers in China [1]. Rural teachers are the key to rural education since teachers in rural areas are the foundation of a more equitable and high-quality rural education [2-4]. Teachers in rural areas in China tend to confront adverse circumstances featuring poor working conditions, low salaries, few opportunities for promotion, and heavier workload than their urban counterparts [5]. Under such adverse circumstances, these teachers in rural areas are more likely to face a variety of challenges in their lives compared to their urban peers. However, there is a dearth of study on Chinese teachers in rural areas' challenges from the teachers' perspectives. Therefore, using a phenomenological approach, this study focuses on the lived experience of four teachers in a rural primary school in Guizhou province, a relatively underdeveloped region located in southwest China, and explore the challenging reality that the teachers confront.

## 2. Status Quo of Teachers in Rural Areas in China

During the past four decades, the rapid urbanization in China has profoundly reshaped the landscape of rural education and teachers in rural areas. This section reviews studies on social status, retention rate and supply of teachers in rural areas and summarizes the status quo of teachers in rural areas in China.

Rural teachers are marginalized in terms of social status. Tong analyzed the social status of teachers in rural areas from a social-cultural perspective and summarized four dimensions to reveal the marginalized social status of teachers in rural areas: (1) low economic status, (2) low social reputation, (3) weak social capital, and (4) narrow upward channel [6]. Tong also attributed the marginalization to the decline of rural culture and the dominance of urban culture [6]. As for the low economic status of teachers in rural areas, Wang conducted surveys to 1064 teachers in rural areas from 3 provinces, and the results revealed that around 97% of teachers in rural areas' annual incomes were below the national average of teachers [7]. In terms of teachers in rural areas' low social reputation, Li claimed that the teachers in rural areas in the 21st century played a less important role in the rural community than those in the last century [8]. Regarding teachers in rural areas' weak social capital, Tong believed that teachers in rural areas were disadvantaged in individual, family, and organizational social capital [6]. Concerning the narrow upward channel of teachers in rural areas, Qin et al. demonstrated that teachers in rural areas tended to be with less access to higher professional ranks than urban teachers based on 7463 questionnaires of rural and urban teachers [9]. Due to the marginalized social status, teachers in rural areas live a relatively challenging life.

Not surprisingly, the retention rate of teachers in China's rural areas is also relatively low. Zhao surveyed 2530 teachers in rural areas from 23 provinces [10]. The results showed that 72% of them had the experience of changing schools, and on average, those teachers change their workplace every 1.71 years. Based on a survey study with 10356 teachers in rural areas in Yunnan Province, Wang and Li found that nearly 80% of teachers had the intention of turnover [11]. They also demonstrated that the most influential factor motivating such intention is their own children's education and family life concerns, followed by welfare and workload, school location and traffic facilities, living conditions, school management and teaching atmosphere, and social and working environment. Consequently, researchers found out that there was a tendency of "returning home" in teachers in rural areas. Wei et al. also revealed that non-local teachers not working in their hometowns were more likely to switch schools mainly driven by family reasons [12].

**Table 1.** Proportion of primary teachers' educational background by region in 2019 [1]

	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Associate graduate	High school graduate
Urban	3.02%	73.63%	22.46%	0.88%
County & town	0.58%	58.89%	38.02%	2.49%
Rural	0.37%	49.28%	45.14%	5.15%

There is also a shortage of qualified teachers in China's rural areas. Table 1 shows the proportion of teachers' educational background at primary schools in urban, county and town (i.e. smaller cities), and rural areas in 2019. Among the three types of schools, rural schools accounted for the lowest proportion of teachers whose highest education level are postgraduate (0.37%) and undergraduate degree (49.28%). The tendency of "moving to cities" makes the shortage of qualified teachers more acute in rural areas [11]. The Rural Teachers Support Plan (2015 - 2020) (<http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015->

06/08/content\_9833.htm.) promoted the flow of excellent teachers from cities and towns to rural schools to improve the overall teacher quality in rural areas. However, the reality is that teachers from urban areas to rural schools are usually temporary teachers and play limited roles in the local school development, while outstanding teachers tend to go to urban schools [10]. As a result, the shortage of qualified teachers has become more acute in Chinese rural areas.

This section reveals the status quo of teachers in China's rural areas, including their marginalized social status, low retention rate, and shortage of qualified teachers. The following section discusses newly released policies that attempt to change the status quo of rural teachers.

### 3. Policies for Teachers in Rural Areas

In recent years, the Chinese government has released a series of educational policies supporting teachers in rural areas. However, the status quo of teachers in rural areas does not seem to have any significant change. State Council issued The Rural Teachers Support Plan (2015 - 2020) in 2015. This plan aims to provide every rural child with equitable and quality education by narrowing the gap in teacher quality between urban and rural areas. This plan highlights the importance of improving teachers' living conditions in rural areas and their competence and teaching quality. It also proposes establishing an honour system for teachers in rural areas and unifying the authorized size of teaching staff (Authorized size of teaching staff: Teachers in the authorized size are funded by the financial allocations and have long-term contracts). in urban and rural schools. Fu and Fan conducted surveys and structured interviews with teachers from 120 rural schools across six provinces [13]. They found that this policy improved the living conditions of teachers in rural areas and rewarded teachers in rural areas through the honour system. They also identified some problems in terms of the implementation of this policy: (1) teachers' low awareness of the support plan, (2) shortage of rural schools' authorized size of teaching staff, and (3) teachers' low satisfaction with their salary and welfare.

In 2018, the State Council and Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) issued Solid Implementation Program for Education in Deep Poverty Areas (2018-2020) ([http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/27/content\\_5269090.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/27/content_5269090.htm)), which is intended to improve the educational development in underdeveloped areas. In terms of measures for teachers, this document proposed to strengthen the construction of better teaching teams in rural areas through the further implementation of Special Post Teacher Plan (Special Post Teacher Plan: A teacher recruitment plan for poverty-stricken areas began in 2006 and was issued Chinese central government and funded by the central and local government. Teachers recruited by this plan will experience a three-year probationary period and have the opportunity to be a member of the authorized size of teaching staff in the local education system if they pass the evaluation of the local school and government) and The Rural Teachers Support Plan (2015 - 2020). However, researchers found that the shortage of authorized size of the teaching staff at rural schools remained a problem [14].

### 4. Literature Review

This section reviews previous studies on the challenges of teachers in rural areas, including their identity crisis, heavy workload, a hierarchical and mistrustful school environment, and ineffective professional learning and development.

A lot of scholars has discussed the identity crisis of teachers in rural areas. In particular, Lin et al. analyzed the identity crisis of rural teachers born after the 1980s, who are labelled as the new generation of rural teachers [15]. They found that these teachers did not have a clear understanding of the role of teachers or awareness of reflecting teaching practices. Researchers also discovered variations of identity in teachers in rural areas from different age groups.

According to Zhao and Fu, teachers in rural areas who were born and grew up before the 1960s tended to regard themselves as rural knowledge workers because they worked in an era when literate people were rare in rural areas [16]. Between the 1960s and 1980s, rural society still welcomed more literate people, so teachers during this period tended to consider themselves hometown educators and felt proud [16]. In contrast, those teachers in rural areas who were born and grew after the 1980s tended to view themselves as rootless transients because of the rapid urbanization in Chinese society [16]. As Huang and Cheng pointed out, these rootless transients are confronted with an urban-rural tension: on the one hand, they felt difficult integrating into the local rural community both with an unwillingness to stay in rural schools [17].

Heavy workload is one of the major challenges for Chinese teachers in rural areas. According to Du and Liu, based on survey results of 2,615 rural and urban teachers from 5 provinces, teachers in rural areas worked 4.64 hours more than urban teachers per week (53.35 hours per week) [18]. Zhao found that most teachers in rural areas had to teach more than two subjects or teach across grades due to the shortage of teachers in schools [10]. Furthermore, Zhu and Liu revealed that non-teaching work of rural such as administrative and local community work accounted for 33.49% of their total working time [19]. In Chinese rural areas, 37.7% of students were left-behind children (Left-behind children: Left-behind children refer to children whose parents leave them in the rural areas and move to urban areas for work) [20]. Rural teachers thus might become their substitutive parents. In this case, teachers had to spend a lot of time on children's academic and psychological development and building communication with parents [19]. Therefore, teachers in rural areas tend to have a heavy workload from both teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as the extra role of substitutive parents. Such a heavy workload may also lead to negative emotions among teachers. Zhao demonstrated that 57% of teachers in rural areas in the survey had a medium or higher level of emotional exhaustion [10]. Rural teachers also suffer from a hierarchical and mistrustful school environment which results from sociocultural norms and ineffective leadership. For example, Liu and Halligner focused on how school leadership would influence teachers in rural China, and they first measured the learning-centred leadership of 32 public school principals from three urban and rural areas (Shanghai, Ningxia and Haining) and revealed that rural school principals featured weaker learning-centred leadership [21]. In the following case study of one rural school with weaker learning-centred leadership, they found some sociocultural norms (e.g., respecting elder, senior, and higher-ranked people and maintaining harmony in relationships) did shape the principal-teacher and teacher-teacher hierarchy, and the ineffective leadership would lead to mistrust and resistance among teachers.

Furthermore, there are also professional learning and development challenges for teachers in rural areas. Some challenges are from the design of the training programs. Liu criticized the training programs for teachers in rural areas as lack of practicality because these programs (1) mainly focused on delivering knowledge rather than cultivating competence; (2) evaluated teachers based on attendance rate and the number of finished coursework rather than their reflection and creativity in terms of assessment; (3) were in a lecture-based model and lack of scenarios from rural teaching context in terms of form [22]. The large number of training programs advocated by the national educational programs also led to challenges for teachers in rural areas. In a study that interviewed 20 teachers in rural areas and local officials from nine underdeveloped counties of Liangshan prefecture in Sichuan province, Li et al. assumed that the overwhelming number of training programs advocated by the recent educational policies might lead to a "dilemma between teaching and training of teachers in rural areas" (p.7)[23].

## 5. Research Questions

From the sections above, it can be seen that most previous research mostly rely on statistical data. However, how teachers experience their various challenges remains poorly understood, which requires an in-depth examination of their experience of confronting challenges. From 2015 to 2020, many teachers in rural areas in China were also involved in the national program of Poverty Alleviation. Rural teachers were with heavy duties and tasks under the crucial period of Poverty Alleviation [24]. In 2021, teachers in rural areas still continue to be involved in the new political agenda of Rural Vitalization. This study fills the gap about teachers' lived experience of the ongoing challenges under the dynamic political context by looking at four primary school teachers in a rural area in Guizhou, a province located in Southwest China. Therefore, this study focuses on (1) what challenges experienced by these primary teachers have experienced, (2) what have caused these challenges, and (3) what the school, the local community, and the government can do to help teachers in rural areas deal with the challenges?

## 6. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. IPA includes three theoretical foundations: the philosophy of phenomenology, the study of phenomena and experience; hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation; and idiography, an inductive technique of focusing on particular cases before moving to general statements [25]. IPA explores the sense-making process of participants' personal and social world and is concerned with participants' perceptions of a particular object and event [26]. Thus, IPA can offer an effective way of examining teachers' experiences in rural areas regarding their challenges.

### 6.1. Participants

The present study was conducted in a Chinese rural central primary school in Guizhou Province between March to July 2021. The author joined the school as a volunteer teacher through a volunteer teaching program of a Chinese non-profit organization. The participants and the author worked as colleagues during the study. The participants of this study are four full-time teachers at that school and were recruited via purposive sampling. In this type of sampling, the samples are chosen based on the researcher's judgments of their typicality [27]. The actual names of the 4 participants are anonymized and labelled as participants A to D, and their following demographic information explains some reasons why they might be typical teachers in rural areas experience challenges:

Participant A: A is a 40-year-old male teacher who teaches maths for two classes and physical education for one class. He is from a village near the central school. A holds an associate's degree in primary teaching. He has taught for 18 years and worked for eight years at the central school. Before working at the school, A worked at schools in different villages. Now A is in the authorized size of the teaching staff and the vice principal in charge of the school's campus security and student development centre.

Participant B: B is a 31-year-old male teacher who teaches maths for two classes and physical education for one class. He is also the homeroom teacher of the class. He is from another county in the prefecture. B holds a bachelor's degree in physical education. B joined the central school eight years ago as a special post teacher and is in the authorized size of the teaching staff now. He assists A in campus security and student development centre and is also in charge of the school's sports department.

Participant C: C is a 27-year-old male teacher who teaches Chinese and physical education for one class. He is also the homeroom teacher of the class. He is from an urban area in the county. C holds a bachelor's degree in physical education. After graduation, C established a sports training institution. He joined the central school three years ago as a special post teacher and is



not in the authorized size of teaching staff yet. C is also in charge of the sports department with B.

Participant D: D is a 28-year-old female teacher who teaches Chinese and music for one class. She is also the homeroom teacher of the class. She is from an urban area in the county. D holds a bachelor's degree in music. Before joining the school three years ago as a special post teacher, she worked as a music teacher in different urban schools in the province. She is not in the authorized size of the teaching staff and has been the leader of the Young Pioneers (Young Pioneers Team: Young Pioneers Team is a social organization for primary school students founded and led by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The member of Young Pioneers Team is the Communist successors as defined by CPC) Team at the central school for two years.

## 6.2. Data Collection and Analysis

After participants were recruited, the study's data collection included three main stages. The first consisted of informal conversational interviews and observations to build trust and identify possible directions for further interviews. The second stage was to conduct informal conversational interviews with participants to examine their challenges and reasons for these challenges. According to Cohen et al., questions of informal conversational interview arise from the immediate context, and the strengths of this kind of interview are "increases the salience and relevance of questions; interviews are built on and emerge from observations; the interview can be matched to individuals and circumstances." (p. 271) [27]. The third stage was to collect other data, such as local policy documents as supplementary data of the participants' challenges. Before recording the interviews, written consent was obtained from the participant. Then the recording would be transcribed and checked with the interviewee to correct misconceptions and add further comments. Next, the transcriptions for analysis were translated into English. The interviews took place at a series of sites within and outside the campus, including the teacher's office, the school canteen, the playground, and restaurants near the school.

The first step of the analysis was to immerse with audio transcripts, observation notes and the reflective research journal and make notes. This step aims to identify themes in each case, followed by finding connections between different themes in the same case as the next step [26]. Thus what are the challenges and what these challenges mean for each teacher can be established. Then the analysis continues with connecting and synthesizing the themes from different cases [26].

## 7. Findings

### 7.1. Theme 1: Heavy Workload within the School

From Mondays to Thursdays, all teachers at the school are required to go to two to four night classes between 18:30 to 20:00. After the night class of one day, B was sitting in the office with cigarettes, sharing his comments about the heavier workload brought by the night classes and his envy at those civil servants:

You see, our workload seems OK based on the class schedule. Take me as an example, 15 lessons for two classes sound fine, but two night classes mean four extra classes every week and two nights I have to work overtime with no compensation to my paycheck. I really admire the life of civil servants here. Although we share a similar level of the basic wage, they can be off duty on time and have various compensations.

During reflecting on his journey of becoming a teacher of this school, C expressed his disappointment about the contrast between his expectations and the school reality after knowing the night classes of the school:

... I felt quite surprised when I first arrived at the school. I've never heard any primary schools in my town have night classes, which may only happen at middle or high schools... I used to regard no night classes as a merit of being a primary school teacher. I used to imagine that I could play football with my students every afternoon after school. Now, this would be daydreaming. I was very disappointed but had to accept that.

Although having night classes was resisted by the teachers, that would be a compromised choice for multiple realistic factors from the school leader's perspective. A explained his version of these factors:

... We understand having night classes is tiring for teachers. So the school passed the proposal of cancelling the night classes on Sundays. We wanted to offer some allowance to teachers, but the school don't have that much money ... Over half of the students are boarding students, and most non-boarding students are looked after by grandparents. If we don't have night classes, most students won't do any homework. Also, as the central primary school, we will lose face if our students' learning outcomes were worse than the subordinate village primary schools. Night classes help us to keep ahead.

B explained how the performance evaluation plan initiated by the current principal made him less motivated:

... 100 homework correcting, 20 personal tutorials, 12 peer observation sessions, and 20 home visits. If I miss any of these, I will lose marks for my individual performance evaluation. Such regulations really treat us like machines. The previous principal never made those compulsory, but we would do those because we feel we need to do... I teach maths for two classes. I did those in the past when I felt they were necessary. But now, I have to complete a certain number regardless of the realistic needs.

Besides heavy workload in teaching, various non-teaching work also makes teachers feel overwhelmed. D said:

I hate International Children's Day... I have to organize all the things whenever there are activities of the school's Young Pioneers Team... I am tired of being its leader, but no other teachers are willing to take this position.

Some of the non-teaching work was difficult for teachers to complete and distract from their daily teaching routine. A mentioned that:

... They (the local education bureau) often assign us various tasks. For example, we were asked to set up a mental health room for left-behind children. We have no professional knowledge of that and are very busy with teaching. Such a task only brought us tokens of paperwork for tokenism.

## **7.2. Theme 2: Endless Political Agenda outside the School**

According to the local policy documents, all the full-time staff of the primary school, the local government, the local bank, and the government were supposed to participate in Poverty Alleviation by forming a one-to-one relationship with one to six poor households. Such a relationship required the staff to: (1) establish files of the poor households' income and possessions; (2) ensure the poor households' housing, medical, educational, and water-supply security; (3) help to relocate the poor households if necessary; (4) help the poor households to be employed or self-employed; (5) ensure the poor households receive various support from the social security system.

According to the participants, the local government had not figured out how to propel Poverty Alleviation until other areas set an example. Therefore, Poverty Alleviation in the local area became a race against the deadline. D shared her pressure and confusion about the tasks brought by Poverty Alleviation:

We had no idea about that first, so we had to see what other areas did ... Poverty Alleviation was the priority last year, and anything else must yield to it. We often had to withdraw our lessons to help the poor household. Sometimes I was confused whether I was a teacher or a civil servant. So my daily routine was almost driving between the school and my poor household. If the mission was not completed, I might lose jobs.

Some of the poor households would take the help of teachers for granted, which made it difficult for teachers to carry out the work and led to their negative feelings. B expressed his complex feelings of grievance, annoyance, and frustration when talking about his poor household:

I have to say, I've never been so humble to anyone else before, even my wife or my parents. The government didn't give us any money for helping the poor household, so I have to spend my own money on almost anything he wanted for the house. Otherwise, he wouldn't be cooperative with my work. But what did I get in return? Nothing except his complaint about I am worse than other helpers.

Although the national Poverty Alleviation was completed in 2020, the teachers' involvement in the political agenda only pressed a pause button. After reading the news that the Rural Vitalization Bureau in Guizhou province was founded, A complained that:

I don't know when it will come to an end. In the past, it was Poverty Alleviation; now, it's Rural Vitalization. Although it changes its name, the pressure for us teachers won't change.

### **7.3. Theme 3: Useless Professional Training Programs**

The participants had various opportunities to participate in professional training programs initiated by different organizations, and they seemed to benefit little from these programs. When searching for the assignment example for a maths teacher training program, B doubted the practicability of the program and complained about the assignment:

(The program) is delivered by teaching experts from the Nanming district, one of the best in our province. The things they talk about are very recondite, and their students are much better than ours. Such programs are not instructive for our teachers in rural areas and students ... Now the reflection after that really troubles me, I don't have much to write about. So I have to take the example from the Internet, which adds to my burden again.

Some training programs were too abstract for teachers, which even led teachers to understand their inattentive students. When playing basketball on the playground, C jokingly said:

When I attended the training program, I finally understood the students who were not concentrating or fell asleep in my class. Because we couldn't understand at all.

When attending a training program for cyber security, A shared his confusion:

I don't know what the point is for us to learn something about cyber security. Are there any hackers that will inbreak our school? My knowledge of those IT things is limited, how can I understand the things he talks about?

### **7.4. Theme 4: Lack of a Sense of Belonging to the School**

The three participants who were not from the local rural area (B, C, and D) showed their lack of a sense of belonging to the school. C shared his feelings of "being looked down on" by some local teachers and mentioned a conflict with one of them:

I have to say, some local teachers at our school seem to look down on our non-local teachers, especially I am still a special-post teacher ... There was a time, I wanted to crack a joke with X to close the distance. So I sent a video of his playing Wushu to the Wechat group. Unexpectedly, he replied with "don't think just because you are not local you can do whatever you want". Since then, I felt he was dissatisfied with me, although I apologized for my bad joke. Then I wondered whether they never treated me as a member of them.



Similar to C, D also shared her feelings of “cannot be integrated into”, which she believed was a result of the gap between urban and rural values:

The rural people, their values were quite different from us. Such differences can tell from various aspects, the customs, the whole atmosphere. For example, they think the amount of wine you drink on the table shows the extent of your relationship with them, even for women ... Anyway, I really couldn't be integrated into them.

Under the feeling of “cannot be integrated into”, D showed her desire to move to the city despite its difficulty:

My family used all of their networks, but getting a position at the urban school is still very difficult. I can't accept if I will work here till I am retired.

B has a different definition of “the local” from C and D. “The local” means people from the local rural area for C and D while it means the local county for B. D felt victimized by being non-local: I have been at the school for 8 years. They tend to bully us because we are non-local. Many non-local teachers left here. Now my wife and I are the only ones who are from other counties but stay here.

Teachers' being out of decision-making was. C said:

As teachers, we never received any greetings or gifts at festivals, even on Teachers' Day. The principal often spent the money on useless projects such as the new book management system and never asked for our opinions. He's always like that, and we rarely have opportunities to make such decisions. We only wait to be informed of his decisions. He only cared about his achievements but neglected our teachers' interests and needs. We are like his chess pieces to win his political game.

The principal's absence in establishing the relationship between teachers was another issue. B said:

I think he doesn't care about his staff. In the past two years since he came, he never has had a personal talk beyond work with me ... He usually leaves the conflicts between teachers alone. I have to say, the relationship between some teachers is quite strained, but he never tried to mediate them. I wish we could be like a family.

According to C, the principal often showed favouritism in the annual excellence teacher selection, which strengthened his feeling of being an outsider of the school:

Last year, he had promised that he and other administrative staff would not participate in the excellent teacher selection. However, only one of the teaching staff got that reward and all the administrative staff got the reward. He just said he made a mistake about the participation criteria. Every year he finds new excuses. I think there is no such thing as fairness in the school. I lose my trust in him and the school. A grass root and non-local teacher like me, I won't be treated fairly here.

### **7.5. Theme 5: Misbehaved Students and Uninvolved Parents**

According to the school's census data, around two-thirds of the students were left-behind children, with one or two of the parents being migrant workers. Under such a demographic context, students' misbehaviour and uninvolved parenting became teachers' challenges. After solving the conflicts of two misbehaved students, A said:

I can forgive the students who are not focusing on their study because it's the nature of children to love to play. You can study badly, but you still need to be a polite and decent person. Do you know why they fight? (Int: No) They scold each other first, and then one of them found out the name of the other student's parents to scold back. They came to a fight at last. Now, such a pattern seems very popular in their class even if I stated that issue in the class. Students at this age (year 5) are really troubling. They like to act the opposite as you said.

In addition to students' rebellion, the issue of puppy love in the class and parents' indifferent attitude to this issue also troubled B:

Due to social media, many students are early-maturing. I did some investigation. Over half of the girls and several boys in my class are involved in different levels of puppy love. I can't believe it happens in a year four class. I talked to their parents, but they rarely took it seriously. When talking about the parents of his students, C emphasized the gap between urban and rural parents:

How couldn't these rural children continue to fall behind the urban children! The urban parents would do anything they could for children's learning. What about the parents of these rural children? Most of them only consider the school as a nursery. The few things they care about are students' security at the school and the money given by the government.

## 8. Discussion

The findings demonstrate six major challenges of the four Chinese teachers in rural areas, which are heavy workload within the school, endless political agenda outside the school, useless professional training programs, lack of sense of belonging to the school, and misbehaved students and uninvolved parents. This section discusses these challenges and their possible causes.

Unpaid over-time teaching in the study could result from multiple realistic factors: the tight school budget, students' lack of adequate parenting after school, and its priority of student outcomes. The findings explain why unpaid overtime teaching is a challenge in teachers' perceptions. The compulsory over-time teaching may contradict teachers' expectations of teaching in a primary school. The unpaid overwork also leads to teachers' admiration of civil servants' regular work and compensations, which aligns with the previous finding that teachers in rural areas' subjective well-being levels are largely connected to their comparative wages to other professions [28].

The explanations for why over-time teaching is a challenge also apply to why involvement in the political agenda is a challenge. As illustrated in the findings, the one-to-one relationship with the poor household was also unpaid and compulsory. Lack of funds from the government to complete the task even increased the financial burden of teachers. Prioritization of these tasks distracted teachers from regular teaching routines, which further confused teachers about their roles. Similar to the positive connections between teacher-researcher conflict and emotional exhaustion for Chinese university teachers [29], the present study suggests the possible connection between teacher-civil servant role conflict and emotional exhaustion for teachers in rural areas under the involvement of the political agenda.

Non-local teachers in the study are found to lack a sense of belonging to the school, some of whom also intend to leave the school. This finding is consistent with the significant effect of teachers in rural areas' sense of belonging on their turnover intentions from the perspective of emotional exhaustion found by Li et al. [30]. The study also identifies possible sources of such a sense of lack of belonging: the strained relationship between teachers in the school [31], the unfairness experienced by teachers, and teachers' failure in the local community engagement [32]. These sources highlight the issues in school management and leadership.

Issues in school management and leadership are challenges but also partial causes of other challenges. The findings reveal how these problems led to teachers' challenges: the unified performance management for a heavy workload, the centralized decision-making for the feelings of marginalization, the poor relationship establishment and conflict management for the hierarchy between the principal and teachers and among teachers, the favouritism for the experience of unfairness and the feelings of being an outsider, the controlling leadership for the weakened autonomy. These findings also provide more evidence for ineffective leadership's

failure to make a difference in teacher development in the rural China [21]. In addition, the participant with a vice-principal position rarely expressed the challenges in terms of school management and leadership. This finding might be explained by Tang, who claims that higher participation in school management may improve teachers in rural areas' subjective well-being [28].

The unequal government-school relationship could be another critical cause for teachers' challenges. The professional training programs, the involvement in the political agenda, and the non-teaching work initiated or assigned by the education authority in the study are mostly perceived as tasks to finish by teachers. Therefore, in addition to the teaching-training dilemma identified by Li et al. [23], teachers' dilemmas in this study also exist between teaching and non-teaching work or political involvement. According to Zhou and Han, the government and rural schools are still under the relationship between superior and subordinate, where the government may excessively interfere with the school affairs and teachers' duties [33]. Teachers' perception of "tasks to finish" may also be a reflection of such a superior-subordinate relationship between the government and the school.

Teachers' challenges of misbehaving students and uninvolved parents would be attributed to their less capacity to deal with the urban-rural inequality in China. According to Kim, teachers in rural areas are not trained or capable of dealing with problems posed by many children with migrant parents in the case of left-behind children. The educational authority in the study also only assigned teachers tasks for left-behind children's mental health without any training [34]. As for teachers emphasis on the rural-urban gap in parents, Kim believes such perceptions come from the dominance of the urban parenting model with intense involvement, but the structural factor such as urban-rural inequality should also be considered [34].

## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study offers an in-depth examination of the challenges and possible causes of these challenges of teachers in rural areas. Through the interpretative phenomenological analysis of teachers' experience of challenges, six major challenges have been identified: heavy workload, political involvement, useless training, lack of a sense of belonging, problematic school management and leadership, and misbehaved students and uninvolved parents. For teachers in rural areas in this research, their challenges are led by a combination of organizational (problematic school management and leadership), political (the unequal government-school relationship), and socioeconomic (the structural urban-rural inequality) factors. Thus, the following five policy recommendations are worth considering for the school, the local community, and the government in China, and possibly other developing nations.

First, teachers' participation in school management could be helpful for them to change their challenging circumstances. The findings of this study reveal how teachers' being out of the school decisions might lead to their experience of unfairness and feelings of marginalization. The involvement of teachers in the school management would offer them opportunities to stand up for their interests. According to Tang, empowering teachers to have voices in school decisions might also be an effective strategy to improve their subjective well-being.

Second, the school principal should also improve their leadership practices. Such practices include building trusted relationships with teachers, on which Browning highlights ten key practices: "openly admits mistakes; offers trust to staff; actively listens; provides affirmation; makes informed/consultative decisions; is visible around the school; remains calm and level-headed; mentors and coaches staff; cares for staff; and keeps confidences." (p. 397). The trust between teachers is also important, which requires the school leader to play a role in establishing a cooperative working environment. In addition, the principal should support non-

local teachers to integrate into the local culture because their understanding of and connection with the local culture would enhance their well-being.

Third, the local community can also establish partnerships with the school to alleviate teachers' burden. For example, MOE suggests that the school can make use of its current and retired teaching staff, off-campus professionals or volunteers to provide after-school services for students, which is funded by financial subsidies, service charges or agency charges. Given the shortage of teachers in rural schools, a school-community partnership with the participation of local community members in after-school services might be more vital for the rural community than the urban.

Fourth, the government can decentralize its power to help teachers deal with their challenges. Such decentralization can be applied to the training authority, which invokes the construction of the teacher education system at the county level. Therefore, the local government and schools can develop training programs based on local teachers' needs. As for non-teaching tasks out of teachers' capability (e.g., the mental health room for left-behind children, campus cyber security), providing specialized services could be an alternative for the government. Teachers' participation in the political agenda should also be voluntary with the necessary financial support from the government.

Last but not least, the government should put efforts into mediating the urban-rural inequality, although this point is beyond the focus of this study. The ongoing nationwide Rural Vitalization may hopefully change the economic landscape in rural areas, attracting more migrant parents to stay in the local area with their children and improving teachers' working conditions.

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