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## Rural Teachers' Retention Willingness: An Empirical Study Based on Alderfer's ERG Theory in Enshi, Hubei, China

Yuanli Dong<sup>1</sup>, Qiqi Liu<sup>2</sup> and Jian Zhang<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Humanities, Education of Enshi Polytechnic, Hubei, China. E-mail: 416372599@qq.com

<sup>2</sup>Education Department, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China. E-mail: 851015143@qq.com

<sup>3</sup>Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: zhangjian@swu.edu.cn

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### Abstract

Rural teachers play a vital role in the development of rural education, and their willingness to stay after their compulsory service contracts end is crucial for strengthening the rural teaching workforce. This paper uses the ERG theory to create an index system and track the willingness of 1,193 rural teachers in Enshi Prefecture, Hubei, who were trained through government programs. By applying SPSS 25, AMOS 24, and other software, the study builds mathematical models to examine factors influencing their decision to stay, the mechanisms behind their choices, and opportunities for improvement. The findings from the multiple linear regression model show that the needs for relatedness, existence, and growth all have a significant positive impact on teachers' willingness to remain. The structural model reveals that relatedness and growth needs have both direct and indirect effects on their decision, while existence needs only have an indirect effect. The analysis of improvement opportunities indicates that existence needs have the greatest potential for improvement, followed by relatedness needs, with growth needs having the least. The paper concludes by emphasizing that retaining rural teachers requires addressing social relatedness needs and implementing a "GRSUI-T" community model.

**Keywords:** Rural teacher, Willingness to stay on, Social relations, Mechanism of action, Opportunities for improvement

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## 1. Introduction

Strengthening teachers' quality is the prerequisite for the prosperity of a country. According to the statistics of the China Education Statistical Yearbook in 2020, 264,200 full-time rural primary school teachers left across

\* Corresponding author: Jian Zhang, Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: zhangjian@swu.edu.cn

the country, accounting for 14.78% of the total number of full-time teachers at the beginning of this year (Ministry of Education, 2021-12). It can be seen that the failure to retain rural teachers is still a difficult problem at present, and the retaining of rural teachers is the key point and basis for the high-quality development of rural education (Hao et al., 2022). In March 2021, the National 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 proposed to build a high-quality education system and strengthen the construction of the rural teaching team (The National People's Congress, 2021). In April 2022, the Plan of Strengthening Teachers of Basic Education in the New Era emphasized that the allocation of educational resources should further implement the living allowance, turnover house, and professional title assessment of rural teachers (Eight Departments, Including the Ministry of Education, 2022). As early as 2015, the Decision of The State Council on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Minorities Education pointed out that "local governments at all levels are responsible main bodies of promoting the development of ethnic minorities education" (The State Council, 2015). In November of the same year, the People's Government of Hubei Province issued the first local implementation measures in China to encourage local governments and normal universities to strengthen localized training according to the actual conditions of local rural education (General Office of the People's Government of Hubei Province, 2015). In 2016, the People's Government of Enshi Prefecture of Hubei Province issued a directional entrusted training program for rural teachers, combining the targeted poverty alleviation task, to entrust Enshi Polytechnic to hold "government order classes" for rural teachers, which enrolled youth from registered local poor families, aiming at directionally training local general-subject primary school teachers and township public kindergarten teachers. This program explored the talent training model of "targets to the counties, allocation to the schools, targeted enrollment, poverty student sources, public recruitment, selective admission, signing contracts upon entering schools, directional training and qualified employment" (Tang, 2020). By 2021, Enshi Prefecture has enrolled a total of more than 1,700 students, with three consecutive years of graduates teaching in targeted rural schools. Some of the principals who graduated from secondary normal schools in early years said, "It reminds us of the model of secondary normal schools in the late 1980s, which was both lively and specialized. The graduates could serve rural areas and teach well" (Mao, 2019).

What is the overall willingness of these rural teachers who have been trained through entrustment by the government to stay in their posts after the expiration of their service in the directional schools according to the agreement? What are the main factors influencing their willingness to stay on? What is the intrinsic mechanism of action? How can measures be implemented as early as possible to effectively increase their willingness to stay on? This study aims to explore these issues one by one.

## 2. Literature Review

Chinese and foreign scholars have done a lot of research on the retaining of rural teachers and its influencing factors. On the whole, these studies mainly involve the subsistence economy, social relations, growth, and development of rural teachers.

In terms of subsistence economy, some studies show that variables such as gender, age, education level, professional title, and personal monthly income significantly affect rural teachers' career mobility willingness (Xiao, 2018). Chevron believes that working conditions related to salary and welfare are important factors for the career attractiveness of teachers in Zimbabwe (Chivore, 1988). Scholars such as Guarino believe that salary, working conditions, and intrinsic motivation are the most attractive factors for United States teachers' willingness to stay on Guarino et al. (2006). Du Ping, Zhao Zhongping, and some others believe that the salary level is the primary factor for the leaving of rural teachers (Du and Xie, 2019; Zhao and Qin, 2016). Fan Xianzuo and some others believe that the key to developing rural education is to improve the economic treatment of teachers (Fan, 2015). Tang Yipeng and Wang Heng argue that wages have a significant positive correlation with the retaining of teachers, and poor material conditions and unsound infrastructure are still important reasons hindering the retaining of rural teachers (Tang and Wang, 2019). A survey shows that the main reasons why special post teachers want to leave their posts are low wages and unsatisfactory living conditions (Liu, 2011). Zhang Ying and others argue that although salary is crucial to affecting the retaining rate of teachers, the increase in salary level has limited influence on the enhancement of teachers' willingness to stay on Zhang et al. (2021). Wu Zhihui believes that the loss of rural teachers is largely not due to the lack of attractiveness of the teaching career itself, but rather to the lack of attractiveness of the social space in which the schools are located (Wu, 2014); to systematically and comprehensively answer the question of "the

attractiveness of the rural teaching career”, the spatial field of rural teachers’ work and life must be considered (Wu and Qin, 2015). He Shuhu and others also believe that the characteristics of rural space are the main factors affecting the mobility of rural teachers (He and Wu, 2021).

Regarding social relations, Zhang Liping and others argue that among the many feelings of rural teachers, rural feelings (rural awareness, rural identification, rural adaptation, and rural reconstruction) are their inner strength for their adherence to the countryside and dedication to rural education (Zhang and Cheng, 2021). Man Zhongkun, on the other hand, argues that rural students’ choice of public-funded normal education is a forced choice in the social context of severe employment pressure, not mainly out of love for rural life and rural education (Man, 2019). Li Jingmei believes that agreement constraints and local emotions are important reasons for rural public-funded directional normal students to return to their hometowns to teach and stay on (within the service period) (Li, 2019). Data released in 2019 by the Northwest Education Research Center in Alaska, USA, confirmed that the psychological support provided by principals enhanced teachers’ sense of belonging and drove teachers to stay on their initiative (Redding et al., 2019). Some study shows that marital status has a significant positive effect on the intention to stay, with married teachers having a higher intention to stay (Fu and Zeng, 2019) and unmarried rural teachers having a significantly lower intention to stay (Gong et al., 2011), suggesting that married teachers have stronger stability and are more willing to take root in rural schools (Jiang and Tian, 2019). Some scholars have found that the main causes of rural teachers’ mobility are social factors such as children’s education and marriage and love issues (Wu, 2014). Public opinion is increasingly unfriendly toward the countryside, believing that university students who go out from the countryside should stay in the cities and that those who return to the countryside to work are “losers” (Yan and Zhao, 2018). There are hidden worries about the career prestige of rural teachers, and the atmosphere of respecting teachers and valuing education in rural society is quietly changing (Liu et al., 2019). Wu Zhihui and others propose that villagers and village committees should actively support the work of schools, enhance positive interaction between teachers and villagers, strive to establish a community foundation, and cultivate a common teaching vision (Wang and Wu, 2019; Guo and Yu, 2012). Russia’s “rural education complex” regards rural education reform as a systematic project, treating rural education as an important part of the rural social system and advocating the sharing of resources and complementation of advantages within the education system (Yu, 2008).

Regarding growth and development, Wei Shuhua and others argue that there is a significant negative correlation between teachers’ career identification and their willingness to change schools or careers (Wei and Song, 2012), and teachers’ career identification is composed of career values, role values, career belonging, and career behavior tendencies (Wei, 2008). However, Li Ye and others exclude the cognition of career ability and behavior from teachers’ career identification (Li et al., 2013). Brill also believes that improving teachers’ career development is more cost-effective and influential in terms of retaining teachers (Brill and McCartney, 2008). Zhang Ying and others believe that schools’ retention strategies (career development, school decision-making participation, teachers’ work pressure, etc.) and school running level have a significant impact on the willingness of urban and rural teachers to stay (Zhang et al., 2021). Some studies have pointed out that the level of training is negatively correlated with the willingness to stay on, and that rural young teachers who graduated from higher-level universities, received higher-level training, and have higher teaching effectiveness have a higher willingness to leave (Fu and Zeng, 2019). US scholars believe that the integration of teachers’ pre-service, induction, and in-service education is one of the “good prescriptions” to solve the problem of teacher loss in primary and secondary schools (Zhou, 2011), and a series of project plans such as Golden Apple have achieved good results (Zhou, 2017; Lu, 2016). Australia’s “Developing Strategies at the Pre-service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues Australian Rural, Regional, and Remote Schools” established a long-term mechanism for rural pre-service teacher training, established a triangular alliance relationship between rural community organizations (including families), universities and primary and middle schools, and is committed to making more pre-service teachers choose to stay in rural schools (Wang et al., 2018).

To sum up, it has gradually become the academic consensus that rural teachers’ willingness to stay in rural areas is influenced by multiple factors. However, it is difficult to draw uniform conclusions because different scholars have chosen different samples and there are differences in the research scales. It can be seen that for a group of teachers in a specific time and space, specific research is required to understand their willingness to stay.

### 3. Theoretical Basis and Index System

Clayton Alderfer, a professor at Yale University, reorganized Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs and published *Existence, Relatedness, and Growth: Human Needs in Organizational Settings* in 1972. He believes that there are three core needs of people, namely existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs, known as "ERG theory". The existence needs correspond to the physiological and safety needs proposed by Maslow, and are the most basic needs for existence, mainly referring to the needs of rural teachers' salary, welfare level, housing security, etc.; the relatedness needs correspond to the social needs and the external part of esteem needs proposed by Maslow, mainly referring to the social relationship between rural teachers and their families, students, colleagues, leaders and villagers; the growth needs correspond to the internal part of esteem needs and self-actualization proposed by Maslow, mainly referring to in-service training and continuing education and professional title assessment for rural teachers. Alderfer's theory differs from Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs in that: first, it does not emphasize the order of the hierarchy of needs, i.e., the hierarchy of needs is reversible, and there is not only the phenomenon of "satisfaction-advancement", but also the phenomenon of "frustration-regression". The lack of any needs will not only drive people to strongly pursue the needs of that level (needs to be satisfied), but also drive people to turn to pursue needs of higher-level (needs to be strengthened), and make people pursue more needs of lower-level (need to be frustrated) (Lu et al., 1993). If teachers do not get the social status and respect that they deserve, their requirements for salary will be stronger. Second, it believes that multiple needs can simultaneously act as motivating factors, e.g., even though rural teachers' existence and relatedness needs have not been fully met, they can still work for the growth needs, and these three needs can work simultaneously.

This study is problem-oriented, and starts from the perspective of the three attributes—economic person, social person, and cultural person—of rural teachers, constructing an index system of the factors influencing "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" based on ERG theory. Based on literature analysis, after two rounds of Delphi expert consultation (theoretical experts and practical experts), it preliminarily constructs an index system of questionnaires and compiles Likert 7-point scale questionnaires based on that. It then randomly selects one class (55 students in total) for pre-testing, and applies SPSS 25 to conduct exploratory factor analysis, reliability test, and other amendments to improve the index system and questionnaires, deleting 3 tertiary indexes and finally forming 3 primary indexes, 9 secondary indexes and 36 tertiary indexes, each of which is set with 1 to 2 observation items. That is, the existence needs dimensions include salary income SAL (overall salary, salary relative to urban teachers, salary relative to civil servants and salary relative to family and friends), rural material environment RURm (shopping convenience, traffic condition, education resources, medical services and entertainment facilities) and school working condition SCHc (teaching equipment, office conditions, dormitory housing and food conditions); the relatedness needs dimensions include family care FAM (love and marriage, child rearing, taking care of parents), rural feeling HOM (rural awareness, rural identification, rural adaptation and rural revitalization) (Zhang and Cheng, 2021), rural educational interactions RURE (student etiquette, student learning, villagers' respect for education and teachers) and school work atmosphere SCHa (leadership justice and democracy, colleague relations, teacher-student relations and management systems); the growth needs dimensions include career identification CAR (career value, self-actualization, role recognition, and pride) (Wei, 2008; Li et al., 2013), professional development PRO (training, promotion system, and opportunities for further education). In addition, demographic variables such as gender, major, teaching years, type of schools in which they work, annual gross income, teaching subjects, training, and awards are also involved.

### 4. Research Design and Implementation

In this study, the term "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" refers to the willingness of rural teachers trained through entrustment to stay after their contract expires, who have taught in the designated school according to the agreement for a certain number of years. To measure the "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" (WILL for short), we set the item "After the contract expires, I am willing to stay on and contribute to the education of my hometown". Seven choices ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" are given according to the Likert scale for alternative answers.

This study conducted a questionnaire survey through the “Wenjuanxing” online platform on all graduates of the government order class in Enshi Prefecture, who graduated to teach in 2019, 2020, and 2021. A total of 1193 students (including 763 primary school teachers and 430 preschool teachers), were distributed in eight counties and cities throughout the prefecture (including Enshi City, Lichuan City, Jianshi County, Badong County, Xuan'en County, Xianfeng County, Laifeng County, and Hefeng County), were surveyed.

This study entrusts the former class teachers of each class to distribute the online questionnaires in their original class chat groups, explaining anonymity, promising confidentiality, and emphasizing truthful filling. For the raw data collected, this study comprehensively applies methods such as analyzing reliability and validity by SPSS 25, Excel, and other software, conducting independent sample T-tests, analyzing variance, conducting multiple linear regression, and splitting files for group comparison, to study the status quo of “willingness to stay after expiration of contract” and its influencing factors, and constructs structural model diagrams by AMOS 24 software to analyze the mechanism of its significant influencing factors.

The total number of formal online survey respondents for this study was 1138 (excluding 55 pre-tested teachers), and 1012 formal questionnaires were returned, with a return rate of 88.93%. This study uses logical mutual verification between items such as salary, major, subject, and class to eliminate invalid questionnaires, resulting in a total of 1009 valid questionnaires. Among the interviewed teachers, the proportion of the eight

Category	Option	Frequency	Proportion %	Category	Option	Frequency	Proportion %
Gender	Male	182	18.04	Years of teaching	One year	217	21.51
	Female	827	81.96		Two years	366	36.27
Major	Primary education	642	63.63	Training Level	Three years	426	42.22
	Pre-school education	367	36.37		County-level and below	688	56.77
Political affiliation	League member (common person)	957	94.85		Prefectural level	185	15.26
	Party member (Probationary Party member)	52	5.15		Provincial level	227	18.73
School category	Teaching point	76	7.53	Award Level	National level and above	112	9.24
	Village primary school	499	49.45		Township and below	448	69.35
	Township Central Primary School	192	19.03		County-level	154	23.84
	Township center Kindergarten	185	18.33		Prefectural level	14	2.17
	Township Junior High School	18	1.78		Provincial level and above	30	4.64

counties and cities under Enshi Prefecture is between 7% and 20%; 96% of the interviewed teachers teach in schools at the township level and below, of which 575 teach in village primary schools, and teaching points, accounting for 56.99%; primary education teachers are about 27% points more than preschool education teachers; 81.07% of the teachers have participated in training, and 54.11% of the teachers have won awards (see Table 1 for details).

The reliability analysis using SPSS 25 software shows that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of the three first-level indexes are between 0.705 and 0.852; the Pearson correlation coefficients of the second-level indexes in the first-level index group are between 0.381 and 0.767, and the corrected item-to-total correlations are all greater than 0.5; the Combined Reliability (CR) of each corresponding first-level index calculated according to the factor loading of each second-level index is all greater than 0.876. It can be seen that the three first-level indexes all have sufficient reliability.

According to the validity analysis, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each corresponding first-level index calculated according to the factor loading of each second-level index is all greater than 0.6, indicating that each first-level index has good convergent validity. The Pearson correlation coefficients among the three first-level indexes are all significantly correlated at the 0.01 level, and the square root of the AVE of each first-level index is greater than the Pearson correlation coefficients between the first-level indexes and other first-level indexes. It can be seen that the first-level indexes have sufficient discriminant validity among each other (see Table 2 for details).

Dimension	Reliability	Convergent Validity	Discriminant Validity			Descriptive Statistics	
	Cronbach's $\alpha$	AVE	Existence Needs	Relatedness Needs	Growth Needs	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Existence needs	0.852	0.776	0.881			4.832	1.009
Relatedness needs	0.779	0.657	0.760**	0.810		5.361	0.876
Growth needs	0.705	0.780	0.668**	0.746**	0.883	5.659	0.759

**Note:** The diagonal line is the square root of AVE. \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

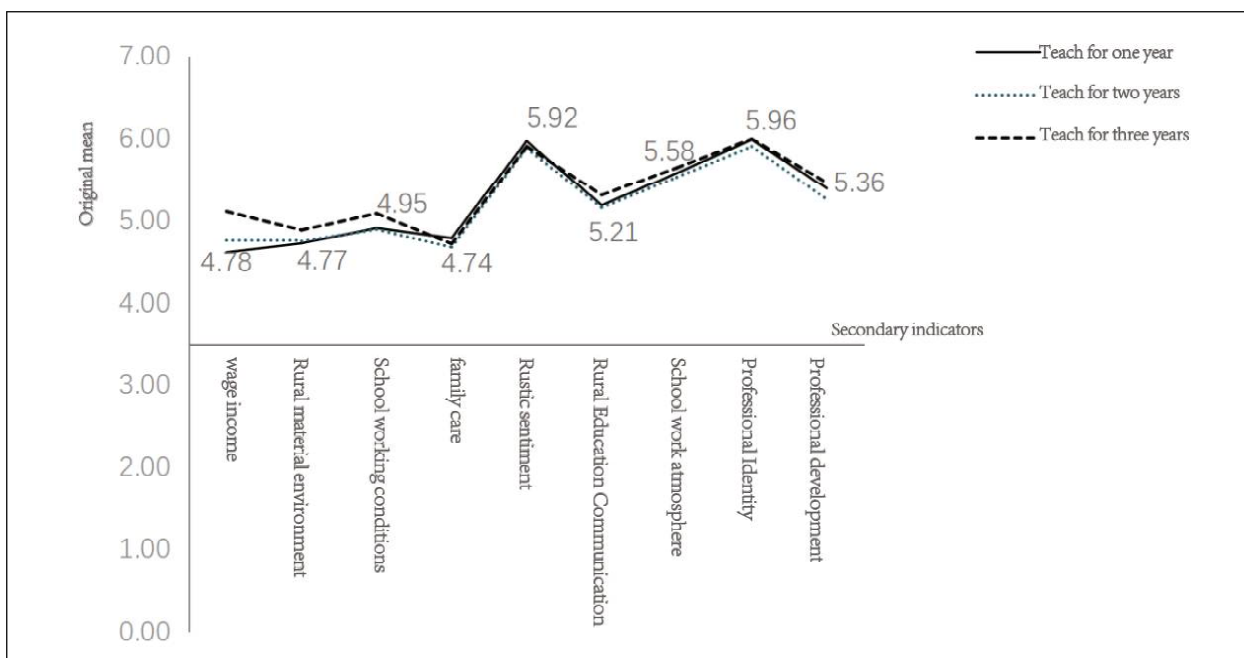
## 5. Findings and Analysis

### 5.1. The Actual Status Quo of "Willingness to Stay After Expiration of the Contract"

The median of the "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" of all interviewed teachers is 5, the mode is 6, and the average is 5.16 (the average values of "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" of teachers who have been teaching for one year, two years and three years are 5.17, 5, 11, 5.22, with no statistically significant difference). It can be seen that on the whole, the interviewed teachers have a relatively high willingness to stay on. The 11 people who chose "strongly disagree" for the item "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" account for 1.09%, while the 155 people who chose "strongly agree" account for 15.36%, with a difference of about 14% points between the two groups. Among the interviewed teachers, 62 teachers have the willingness to leave after the expiration of their service period (choose "strongly disagree", "disagree" or "somewhat disagree"), accounting for only 6.14%; 277 people who are not sure (choose "moderate") account for 27.45%; and a total of 670 people who have a strong willingness to stay (choose "somewhat agree", "agree", "strongly agree") account for 66.40%. It can be seen that, on the whole, the implementation effect of the order-based training model for rural teachers in ethnic minority areas is relatively satisfactory.

The scores of the items corresponding to the second-level indexes range from 1 to 7, as shown in Figure 1, with the lowest average score being 4.74 (family care) and the highest 5.96 (career identification). The overall





**Figure 1: Changes in the Raw Average Scores of Second-Level Indexes with Years of Teaching**

**Note:** The data in the figure are the raw average scores of all second-level indexes of all interviewed teachers.

average of all items is 5.25, and the overall score is high. One-way ANOVA shows that, with the increase of teaching years, the differences in the second-level indexes of the relatedness needs dimension are not significant, while the second-level indexes of the existence need dimension show a significant increase at the 0.01 level, and the second-level indexes of the growth needs dimension show a significant difference at the 0.05 level. It can be seen that although rural teachers are all locally registered residents, in the first year of employment, the role transition from student to teacher is not timely enough, and they are still in the psychological adaptation period. After this transition period, they can gradually adapt to the environment, better take on the responsibility of teaching, and properly handle various difficulties in their life, work, and study, so the relevant scores on the two dimensions of existence and growth increase year by year.

According to the average values of the three first-level indexes, growth needs (average value 5.66) and relatedness needs (average value 5.36), two first-level indexes involving cultural and social levels respectively, score relatively high, and their items score relatively high as well. However, the existence needs (average value 4.83), a first-level index related to the material economy, generally scores low, and its item generally scores low as well. This is consistent with the fact that the rural communities where the rural teachers live and the rural schools where they teach are both located in the former national-level deep poverty areas which have only recently managed to get rid of poverty. It also reflects that on the one hand, at the objective material level, rural teachers are not satisfied with the current situation of economic life such as the material environment of rural communities; on the other hand, at the spiritual and cultural level, rural teachers have a high degree of recognition of the government order-based training model, and have a high degree of identification with the local folk culture in their hometown, being able to find sense of identity and belonging in the social network of rural areas.

With each demographic variable as the grouping variable and “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” as the dependent variable, an independent sample T-test or analysis of variance is carried out. Statistics show that majors, working years, political affiliation, and awards have no significant influence on “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract”, while different school groups and whether teachers are trained or not have significant differences in terms of “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract”. As shown in Table 3, the average value of the trained teachers’ willingness to stay after the expiration of the contract is 5.20, which is significantly higher than that of the untrained teachers (4.98) at the 0.05 level. This may be because relevant professional training provides a platform for the expansion of rural teachers’ social network radius; the professional training content helps rural teachers improve their professional ability and

professional level in education and teaching; broadens their professional horizons, and helps rural teachers form positive emotions and attitudes towards work and life. An optimistic attitude, in turn, promotes better education work and interpersonal communication among rural teachers, thus forming a virtuous circle and healthy development.

		Number of Cases	Average	Standard Deviation	t-value
Training or not	Yes	818	5.20	1.252	2.125*
	No	191	4.98	1.397	

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

As shown in Table 4, the average value of township central primary schools' teachers' willingness to stay on was 5.44, which is significantly higher than that of teachers in teaching points (4.91) and village primary schools (5.10) at the 0.01 level. This is mainly due to the relatively large size of township central primary schools, the similarity of school buildings, teaching model, and teaching methods to those in urban schools, and the convenience of daily life and traffic, making it easier for rural teachers to experience the sense of achievement and life value of teaching and education. However, the number of students in teaching points and village primary schools, which are small-scale schools, has decreased significantly. In addition to the gap in school hardware and facilities, what confuses rural teachers more is that the teaching theories and teaching methods learned in training colleges and probationary schools are no longer effective, and it is difficult to improve teaching performance, with an imbalance between effort and gain, insufficient sense of accomplishment in teaching, excessive sense of frustration and confusion about professional development prospects.

	Sum of Squares	Average Square	F	The Post Hoc LSD Method
Between groups	24.467	4.078	2.500*	Township central primary schools > teaching points, village primary schools
Within group	1634.201	1.631		
Total	1658.668			

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ .

It can be seen from the above that although there are significant differences in the "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" of this batch of rural teachers trained under government orders in terms of school type and training, on the whole, their "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" is strong, and shows a small increase with the increase of teaching years, that is, after the end of the contract service period, the probability of this batch of rural teachers trained under government orders to continue to stay is relatively great! This proves that the order-based training model is a good solution to the problem of "failure to retain" rural teachers in ethnic minority areas. The fact that rural teachers trained under orders are emotionally inclined to stay on after their service period expires is largely because the rural teachers' needs for professional growth and social relations are better met, thus compensating for the lack of material needs and satisfaction, that is, rural teachers' social and cultural attributes play an important role.

## **5.2. Factors Influencing "Willingness to Stay After Expiration of the Contract"**

Statistical analysis shows that the Pearson correlation coefficients of the three first-level indexes and the "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" all reach the 0.01 significant level, and the absolute value of the Pearson correlation coefficients between the three first-level indexes is between 0.6 and 0.7, that is, there is a significant medium-to-high correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ). From the test statistics of the overall regression model, it



can be seen that the VIF values of collinearity statistics are all less than 3.2, that is, there is no collinearity problem among variables, and multiple regression analysis can be performed.

This study uses the three first-level indexes—existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs—as predictive variables (independent variables), uses “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” as a calibration variable (dependent variable), and uses the forced input method to do multiple linear regression to get a regression model. The multivariate correlation determination coefficient  $R^2$  of this model is equal to 0.321, and the adjusted  $R^2$  is 0.319, that is, the three independent variables can explain 31.9% of the variation of the dependent variable, indicating that the overall explanatory variables of the three independent variables have reached a significant level ( $F = 158.562$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), which has moderate explanatory power for the dependent variable.

The regression analysis results are shown in Table 5. The regression coefficient of the three predictive variables all reach the significant level in the significance test, among which the relatedness needs to reach the 0.001 significant level; the existence needs and the growth needs to reach the 0.01 significant level.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	T	Significance	VIF Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Standard Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	0.389	0.254		1.534	0.125	
	Existence needs	0.173	0.052	0.136	3.313**	0.001	2.507
	Relatedness needs	0.535	0.067	0.365	7.939***	0.000	3.131
	Growth needs	0.189	0.068	0.112	2.785**	0.005	2.384

**Note:** \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . a dependent variable: willingness to stay after expiration of contract.

The testing of unstandardized regression coefficient B of the regression model and the significance of its t value shows a multiple linear regression model of “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract”, namely,  $WILL = 0.389 + 0.173 * E + 0.535 * R + 0.189 * G$ .

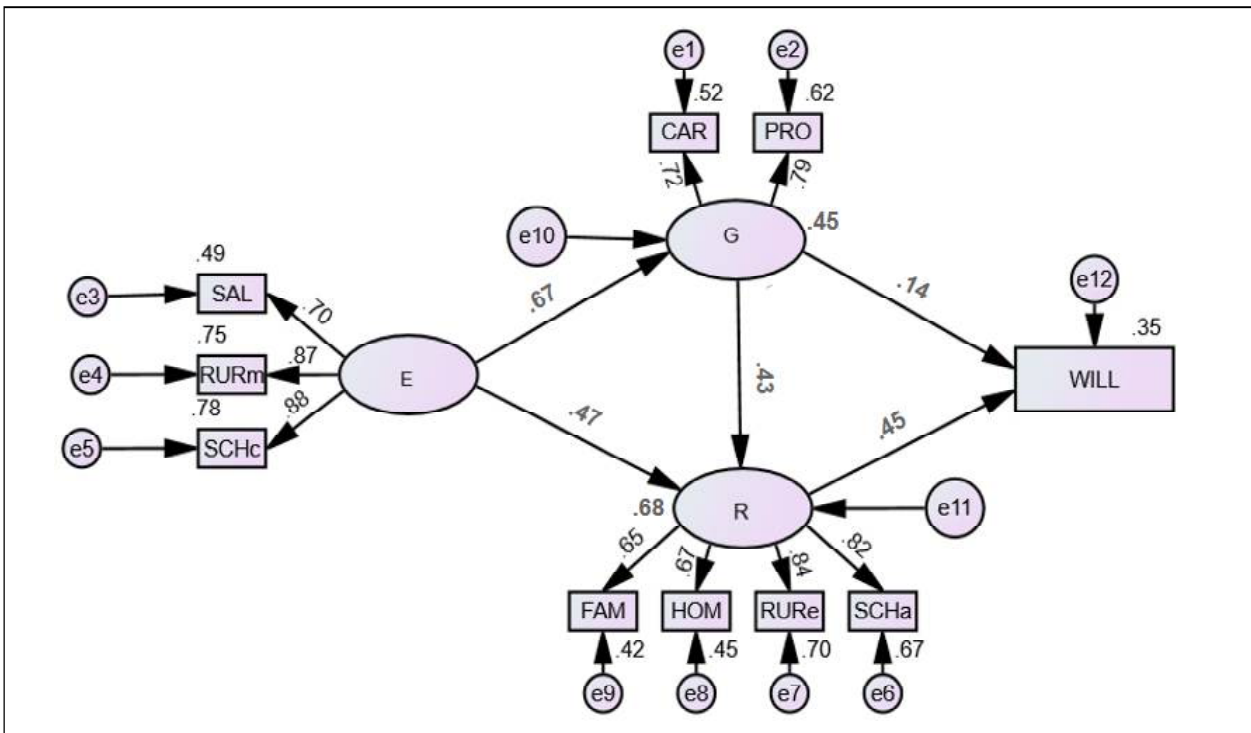
This model is consistent with the value of the standardized coefficient  $\beta$ , that is, the factors significantly influencing the “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” are the relatedness needs E ( $\beta = 0.365$ ,  $T = 7.939$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), the existence needs ( $\beta = 0.136$ ,  $T = 3.313$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and growth needs ( $\beta = 0.112$ ,  $T = 2.785$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). It can be seen that the behavioral tendency of rural teachers to stay or not stay after the expiration of their service period was more focused on the needs and satisfaction of social relationships and material and economic conditions than on professional development and self-growth, especially in rural communities and rural schools. The most critical influence is the social relationship network and atmosphere formed by the social interaction with students, colleagues, school leaders, parents of students, community villagers, and local administrative staff who are in direct contact with them. In particular, the influence of the social relationship network and atmosphere formed by rural teachers’ social interactions with their directly connected students, colleagues, school leaders, parents, community villagers, and local administrative staff in the field of rural communities and rural schools is the most critical.

It can be seen from the above that material existence and economic conditions, social relations and interpersonal communication, professional development and personal growth all positively and significantly affect the “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” of rural teachers trained under orders, but the importance of these influencing factors vary, from the need for relationships, the need for survival, and the need for growth, in descending order. Relatively speaking, the training related to the professional development of rural teachers has the least influence, that is, the most important factor affecting rural teachers’ “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” are the humanistic atmosphere and basic material living and working conditions of rural schools and communities in the rural teachers’ life field, which are consistent with the attributes of social and economic persons of rural teachers.

### 5.3. The Mechanism of Action of “Willingness to Stay After Expiration of the Contract”

Based on the above analysis results of SPSS 25, this study uses the method of mathematical modeling to explore the internal mechanism of action of rural teachers’ “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” and ERG factors using AMOS 24 software. Specifically, this study uses the average values of the three first-level indexes—existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs—as potential variables, and defines them as measurement index variables, explores their path relationship, namely structural equation model, and establishes a causal model of “willingness to stay after expiration of contract” (see Figure 2). The structural equation model has three path assumptions, namely: Hypothesis 1: the economic base determines the superstructure, so the economic person attributes of rural teachers affect the cultural and social person attributes, i.e., E influences G and R; Hypothesis 2: According to Marxist theory, rural teachers are the sum of all social relations (The Bureau of Compilation and Translation of Works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2012), then G has influence on R; Hypothesis 3: Under the social background of the overall victory in poverty alleviation and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, when the salary income of rural teachers is guaranteed, the existence needs will not have direct influence on WILL, but will have indirect influence on WILL through R and G.

The structural equation model for “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” is constructed from the above three hypotheses as shown in Figure 2, and the unstandardized coefficients (Regression Weights) of all paths are shown to be significant.



**Figure 2: Structural Model Diagram of Factors Influencing “Willingness to Stay After Expiration of Contract” (Standardized Coefficients)**

The test of fitness of the structural equation model shows that the absolute fitness index RMSEA = 0.09, and the ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom  $\chi^2/df = 10.947$ , which reaches the ordinary fitness standard; GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI, and IFI are all greater than 0.9, which reaches the good fitness standard (see Table 6 for details). It can be seen that the model fits well.

$\chi^2$ Value	Degree of Freedom (df)	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA	NFI	IFI
7.751	1	10.947	0.995	0.946	0.995	0.09	0.995	0.995

This study uses AMOS24 to analyze the mediation effect of the structural model, using the bias-corrected percentile Bootstrap test method, setting 1000 iterations and a 95% confidence interval estimate. The results are shown in Table 7: the relatedness needs and the growth needs have a direct effect on the “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract”, which are 0.45 and 0.14 respectively. The relatedness needs and the growth needs both show mediating effects, and the effect values were 0.34 and 0.22 respectively. None of the 95% confidence intervals contain 0, that is, they all reach the significant level of  $p < 0.001$ , and the mediating effects account for 8.82%, 20.59%, and 12.75% of the total effect respectively. It can be seen that the largest total effect value is for the relatedness needs (0.45), followed by the existence needs (0.43), and the smallest is for the growth needs (0.14).

Effect	Mediation Path	Effect Value	Effect Size
Direct effect	Relatedness needs--a willingness to stay after the expiration of the contract	0.45	44.12%
	Growth needs--a willingness to stay after expiration of contract	0.14	13.73%
Indirect effect	Existence needs--Growth needs--a willingness to stay after expiration of contract	0.09	8.82%
	Existence needs--Relatedness needs--a willingness to stay after expiration of contract	0.21	20.59%
	Existence needs--Growth needs--Relatedness needs--willingness to stay after expiration of contract	0.13	12.75%
Total effect		1.02	

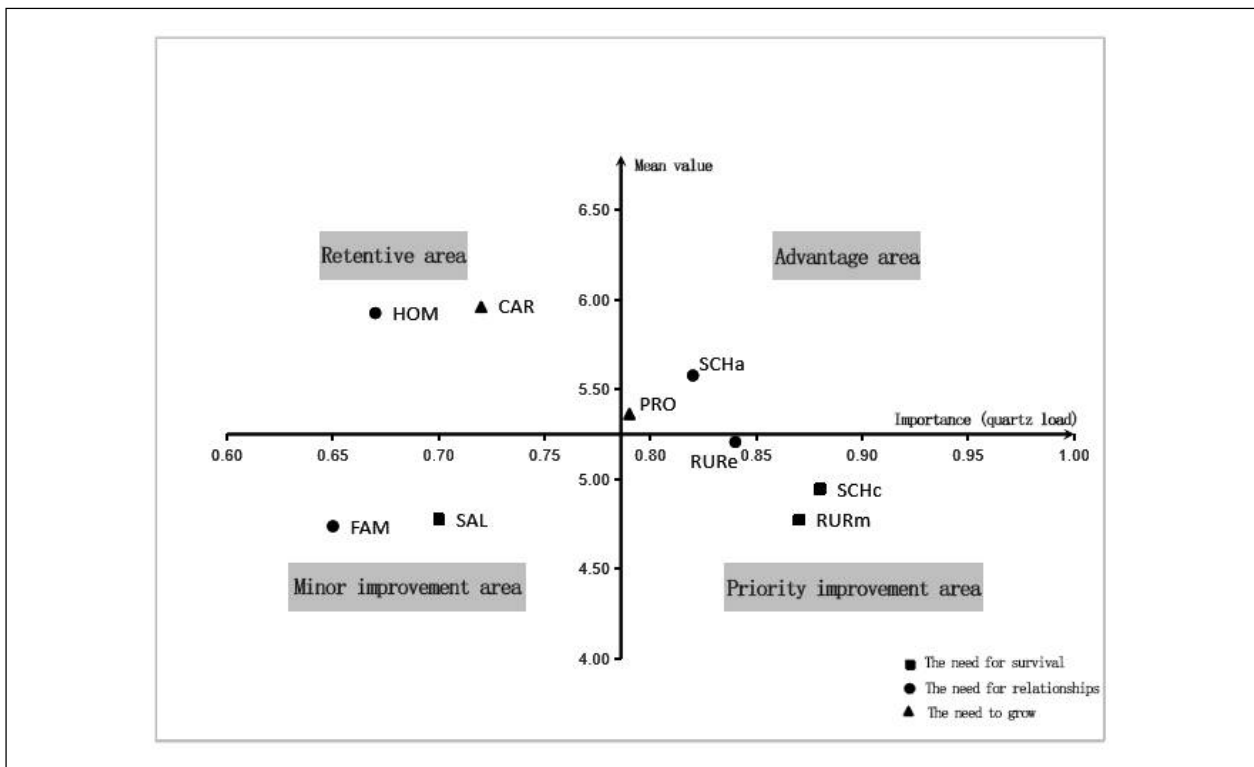
It can be seen from the above that the three path hypotheses of the influencing factor structure model of “willingness to stay after expiration of contract” are all valid, and the following conclusions can be drawn: first, the existence needs E, the relatedness needs R and the growth needs G all have significant influence on the “willingness to stay after expiration of contract”, among which the relatedness needs R and the growth needs G both have direct influence on the “willingness to stay after expiration of contract”, while the existence needs E corresponding to the attributes of rural teachers as economic persons does not have direct influence on the “willingness to stay after expiration of contract”, instead it makes indirect influence through the mediation of the relatedness needs and the growth needs; second, in accord with the results of the previous SPSS 25 multiple linear regression analysis, the factors influencing rural teachers’ willingness to stay after expiration of contract are, in descending order, the relatedness needs R, the existence needs E and the growth needs G.

In short, the three major factors (E, R, G) influencing rural teachers’ “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” are not independent of each other, but affect, constrain, and promote each other, and have significant mediating effects. As Marx said, the economic base determines the superstructure. The needs and satisfaction of rural teachers in terms of material survival and economic conditions are the most fundamental, which affect the needs and satisfaction of rural teachers’ social and interpersonal relationships, as well as the needs and satisfaction of professional development and self-growth. However, people are ultimately the sum of all social relations, and rural teachers are essentially the sum of all social network relations in the rural field. The needs and satisfaction of rural teachers’ social relations are not only constrained by material living conditions but also constrained by professional development conditions, which are the most critical of the factors influencing rural teachers’ “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract”.

#### **5.4. Opportunities for Improvement of the “Willingness to Stay After Expiration of the Contract”**

In this educational practice, which of the indexes affecting rural teachers’ “willingness to stay after expiration of the contract” have greater opportunities for improvement? This study, taking the factor loadings of each second-level index variable in the corresponding common first-level index analyzed by AMOS24 software as

the horizontal axis, the unweighted raw average scores of each second-level index as the vertical axis, and the average of the factor loadings and raw average scores as the coordinate origin, makes a matrix diagram of opportunities for improvement of all question items (see Figure 3). It can be seen that the school working atmosphere SCHa and professional development PRO are in the advantage area, that is, there is little opportunity for improvement; the career identification CAR and the rural feeling HOM are in the maintenance area, that is, the opportunity for improvement is small; the salary income SAL and family care HOM are in the secondary improvement area, that is, the opportunity for improvement is greater; while the rural educational exchange RURe, school working condition SCHc and rural physical environment RURm are in the priority improvement area, that is, the opportunity for improvement is the greatest. It can be seen that, for this group of rural teachers trained under government orders, the significance of the factors influencing the willingness to stay after the expiration of the contract is not consistent or positively correlated with the opportunities for improvement. For example, the working atmosphere and rural feelings of rural schools significantly affect rural teachers' willingness to stay after the expiration of the contract, but their opportunities for improvement are few, with little room for improvement, and it is only suitable to continue to maintain their advantages; wages, on the other hand, have a positive but insignificant effect on the willingness to stay after expiration of contract, but have greater opportunities for improvement, and have significant influence on rural teachers' social relationships and professional growth.



**Figure 3: Matrix Diagram of Opportunities for Improvement of Second-Level Indexes**

It can be seen from the above that the opportunities or room for improvement of the various factors influencing rural teachers' "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" vary greatly, that is, the adoption of corresponding incentive measures for different influencing factors will produce different implementation results. To maintain or strengthen the "willingness to stay after expiration of contract" of this batch of rural teachers trained under orders, and provide them with the necessary material and spiritual guarantees for devoting themselves to the cause of rural education revitalization without worrying, it is necessary to continue to maintain the advantages of the humanistic atmosphere of rural schools and the scaffolding for professional development provided by the training institutions. Moreover, compared to the incentive policies such as strengthening career identification, increasing rural feelings, and promoting professional development, the following effective strategies are more worth advocating: first, rural schools should improve their office conditions as soon as possible, and solve the worries of rural teachers such as food, traffic and accommodation; second, we should vigorously promote the rural revitalization strategy, and continuously improve the physical and

cultural environment of rural communities, with particular emphasis on cultivating civilized rural customs such as respect for teachers and education; third, we should further increase rural teachers' salary level, provide convenience for them to take care of their families and guarantee the social status and dignity that rural teachers deserve.

## 6. Research Discussion and Prospects

### 6.1. Satisfying the Relatedness Needs is the Theoretical Logic of Retaining Rural Teachers

The results of the study show that the relatedness needs are the most significant factor affecting rural teachers' willingness to stay after the expiration of a contract; in the institutional model of the mechanism of action, the relatedness needs to show significant direct and mediating effects, with a total effect value of 0.79; in the matrix diagram of opportunities for improvement, the indexes related to the relatedness needs are not concentrated but scattered in different quadrants, with school working atmosphere in the advantage area, rural feeling in the maintenance area, family care in the secondary improvement area, and rural educational interactions in the priority improvement area. It can be seen that rural teachers' overall high "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract" is due to the advantages of the two indexes related to the relatedness needs—school working atmosphere and rural feelings.

Based on empirical analysis, this study believes that the relationship between rural teachers and various social actors is the essence of retaining. Rural teachers are essentially the sum of all social relations. Rural teachers' growth needs, mainly concerned with issues such as self-planning, self-reflection, self-growth, self-fulfillment, and self-actualization of rural teachers, are fundamentally the relationship between rural teachers and themselves. Although rural teachers' existence needs are the most fundamental material basis, under the current economic background of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and the overall victory in poverty alleviation and the current social background of population aging, declining birth rate, and the different worldviews, outlooks on life and values of the new generation of rural teachers, the existence needs no longer play a direct decisive role in the willingness to stay on. Instead, they influence their willingness to stay on by affecting the relationship between rural teachers and students, colleagues, leaders, parents, villagers, family members, and themselves. As Durkheim says, society is not really only composed of individuals, but also includes some material aspects, which play an important role in common life as well; concrete and fixed life does exist and has an impact from the outside (Durkheim, 2016). In short, meeting the rural teachers' relatedness needs is the logical starting point of all strategies for retaining.

Tao Xingzhi pointed out long ago that the overriding condition for fulfilling the mission of rural education was the willingness of comrades to dedicate their whole hearts to the rural people and children (Tao, 2005). Many scholars hold the same view. For example, some say that only those who love the countryside and rural education can be selected to do a good job in rural education (Zhu, 2021); some say that localized education should be established in suitable villages so that returning to the countryside and engaging in rural education can become a dignified job and a pursuit of a good life (Li et al., 2021). In this study, most of the rural teachers trained under orders returned to their childhood alma mater or their hometown to work, so it is easier for them to handle all kinds of complicated social relations and meet their relatedness needs in the field of acquaintance society in the countryside. "I'm not trying to get away from my poor hometown, but trying to keep my hometown away from poverty, which is my obligation and responsibility." "I want to bring the confidence on the faces of those children in cities to the children in the mountain villages in my hometown..." (Xiang et al., 2019) Such plain words are full of local feelings and a sense of mission for the revitalization of rural education, which meets the rural teachers' relatedness needs and growth needs. They return to their hometowns, pursuing their education values and fulfilling their education life in the familiar and warm rural atmosphere. As UNESCO argues, schools' recruiting and affirming of Indigenous teachers better reflect the cultural heritage of their students, have lived experience, and maintain connections with their communities, enabling them to understand the needs, aspirations, and cultural patterns that are of great value in creating a just and equitable educational future (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). However, it is particularly noteworthy that the scores of rural teachers trained under orders are not high in terms of civilized rural customs such as family care and respect for teachers. In particular, it is necessary to pay more attention to unmarried young rural teachers, resolve the life difficulties

of young rural teachers such as separation of spouses, family care, and children's education, and reduce rural teachers' worries.

## **6.2. Building a "GRSUI-T" Retaining Community is the Practical Logic of Retaining Rural Teachers**

The results of the study show that the relatedness needs, the existence needs and the growth needs all have a positive and significant influence on rural teachers' "willingness to stay after expiration of the contract"; the structural model of the mechanism of action shows that the three needs are not independent, but interact with each other and work together; the matrix diagram of opportunities for improvement shows that those with greater opportunities for improvement include school working conditions, salary income, family care, rural educational interactions and rural physical environment. The factors influencing the retaining of rural teachers involve relevant social activity entities such as the government, rural communities, rural schools, pre-service training universities, and in-service continuing education institutions.

Based on the above empirical analysis, this study argues that the retaining of rural teachers needs to go beyond the barriers of the education system unite the strengths of all relevant social actors, and build a rural teacher-retaining community consisting of six social actors—governments at all levels G, rural communities R, schools S, universities U, institutions of research and training I and teachers T, i.e., the "GRSUI-T Retaining Community". Most of the current problems of rural education cannot be solved by education research (Ye, 2021) and there is still much room for development in terms of improving mechanisms and policies (Banerjee and Duflo, 2018). The actors of rural revitalization should have the breadth and universality of "rural people" beyond the geographical sense (Ye, 2022). Small-scale schools are the future trend of rural schools, and the integration of school development and rural revitalization has received attention from both academic and practical circles. For example, Tianzige Elementary School in Guizhou Province, Fenzhong Beauty Elementary School in Yunnan Province, Fanjia Elementary School in Guangyuan City of Sichuan Province, and other schools have developed their characteristics and achieved results. What is more, it is necessary to pay attention to the unshirkable responsibility of the countryside as the field's main body of social activities in the revitalization of rural education, such as fully learning from the practical wisdom of Jinyun Rural School in Zhejiang Province in hiring the village secretary as the vice principal and hiring the school principal as the deputy secretary (Wu, 2022). In the specific practice of creating a civilized rural atmosphere such as respecting teachers in rural communities, although the self-discipline and self-awareness of each type of actor are essential, there is a greater need to highlight the leading role of the government (Jiang, 2021) and to actively play the exemplary leading role of the village Party branches and village committees (Wu, 2021).

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the law of the growth of teachers' educational lives, under the leadership of the government, the "GRSUI-T Retaining Community", which gathers strength to guide and assist rural teachers in properly handling and carefully managing various complex social relationships, is the institutional guarantee and practical logic for improving rural teachers' willingness to stay on.

This study is a quantitative empirical study on the willingness to stay on of rural teachers trained through entrustment under orders in ethnic minority areas, to provide a reference for solving the problem of "retaining" in the construction of rural teacher teams in China.

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