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Current Status, Challenges, and Quality-Improvement Pathways for Kindergarten Principal Development in Poverty-Alleviated Rural Areas: A Nationwide Survey Across 10 Provinces in China

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Abstract

Based on a nationwide survey of 1,386 kindergarten principals across 10 Chinese provinces, this study identifies three critical workforce challenges in rural, poverty-alleviated regions—namely, (1) severe principal shortages, particularly in rural areas; (2) structural weaknesses persisting in private and village kindergartens despite overall improvements; and (3) prominent supply–demand imbalances in professional support despite enhanced qualifications. The findings reveal significant gaps between policy objectives and actual leadership conditions. The following three evidence-based solutions are proposed: enhancing recruitment through fiscal autonomy and faculty stabilization, optimizing structure via prioritized opportunities and rotation programs, and enhancing support quality through collaborative workload reduction and needs-based systems. These recommendations provide actionable strategies for strengthening principal leadership and promoting sustainable educational development in rural preschools.

Keywords: *Poverty-alleviated regions, Kindergarten principals, Teacher workforce development*

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1. Introduction

The Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 highlights the urgent need to consolidate poverty-alleviation achievements and advance rural revitalization following the eradication of absolute poverty. In this context, high-quality rural preschool education is vital for sustaining poverty-reduction outcomes and promoting long-term rural development. Central to this effort is the cultivation of a professional, skilled, and innovative teaching workforce, with kindergarten principals serving as its core leadership. The effectiveness of rural preschool education ultimately depends on the competence and professional growth of these principals, whose leadership directly shapes teacher capacity-building and overall educational quality.

The development of rural preschool teaching teams has become a central focus in educational research, particularly amid national efforts toward quality improvement. Policies such as the National Medium- and Long-Term Education

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Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) and the State Council’s Several Opinions on the Current Development of Preschool Education (2010) have prioritized strengthening the rural teaching workforce. Further reinforcing this agenda, the 2018 Several Opinions on Deepening Reform and Regulating the Development of Preschool Education emphasized structural optimization and quality enhancement in rural preschool education. These measures have narrowed regional disparities in educational resources, especially in poverty-alleviated regions (Lai and Chen, 2022). Despite notable progress in areas such as professional identity and student-teacher ratios (Ma, 2023), challenges persist, including teacher shortages (Yang, 2022), structural imbalances (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), and uneven quality across institutions (Gao *et al.*, 2020).

Existing research on rural preschool teacher development often overlooks the distinct roles, leadership functions, and professional needs of principals, treating them merely as part of the broader teaching workforce. Consequently, policy recommendations frequently lack targeted strategies for principal development. While some studies have evaluated principals’ competencies using the Professional Standards for Kindergarten Principals (Lin and Cai, 2018) or examined disparities across urban-rural (Qu, 2022) and public-private settings (Hong *et al.*, 2019), their scope and analytical depth remain limited.

Current scholarship on rural kindergarten principals focuses on three main areas: policy analysis (Li, 2009), competency frameworks (Hong *et al.*, 2018), and institutional mechanisms (Wang *et al.*, 2024). Recently, in addition to traditional top-down “macro-development” approaches, scholars have advocated “micro-development” strategies centered on individualized growth, which have drawn greater attention to principals’ professional identities, self-assessment practices, career trajectories, and reflective narratives. While these studies acknowledge substantial progress in principal team development and analyze challenges from multiple perspectives, the absence of an integrated analytical framework has impeded consensus on critical issues and practical solutions, thereby diminishing the overall impact of policy interventions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

This study employed a stratified sampling method based on the geographic distribution of poverty-alleviated counties (eastern, central, and western regions) among the 832 nationally designated impoverished counties that were officially removed from the poverty list by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development. The sample consisted of rural kindergartens from 10 provinces: Shandong, Henan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Chongqing, and Sichuan.

A total of 1,485 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,386 valid responses were retained after excluding incomplete or inconsistent submissions (valid response rate: 93.3%). The final sample included 713 public kindergartens (51.4%), 673 private kindergartens (48.6%).

2.2. Instrument

A Questionnaire on the Development of Rural Kindergarten Principals in Poverty-Alleviated Regions was constructed through a systematic review of national policy documents and theoretical frameworks on rural teacher and principal development. The instrument was designed to assess the current status of rural kindergarten principal teams and to provide empirical evidence supporting policy formulation. The questionnaire assessed three core dimensions:

Quantity: Supply-demand data were sourced from the China Education Statistical Yearbook, as this metric could not be self-reported.

Structure: Non-scale items covering principal demographics (gender, age, and tenure), qualifications (education level, professional title, and major), and institutional characteristics (kindergarten type, location, size, and funding).

Quality: Likert-scale items measuring professional credentials, career development, job satisfaction (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$), and working conditions (KMO = 0.87, $p < 0.05$; cumulative variance explained = 74.9%).

2.3. Procedure

Before nationwide distribution via Questionnaire Star in March 2024, the instrument was rigorously validated through two stages:

Expert review: A Delphi panel assessed the questionnaire’s primary and secondary dimensions, and revisions were made based on expert feedback.

Empirical investigation: Two rounds of trials were conducted with township- and village-level kindergarten principals in selected poverty-alleviated counties, followed by cognitive interviews to refine item clarity, relevance, and length.

2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (SPSS 26) were used to analyze the structural and quality indicators of the principal teams. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between working conditions and turnover intentions, thereby assessing principals’ occupational well-being.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Quantity Indicators: Insufficient Supply of Principals, with Acute Shortages in Rural Areas

Data on the number of rural kindergarten principals were obtained from the China Education Statistical Yearbook (Ministry of Education) for 2013, 2016, 2019, and 2022. These years correspond to the completion of each phase of the Three-Year Action Plan for Preschool Education, a national initiative launched in 2010, with 2022 serving as a post-implementation benchmark.

A longitudinal analysis of these data (Figure 1) reveals a persistent undersupply of principals, particularly in rural areas.

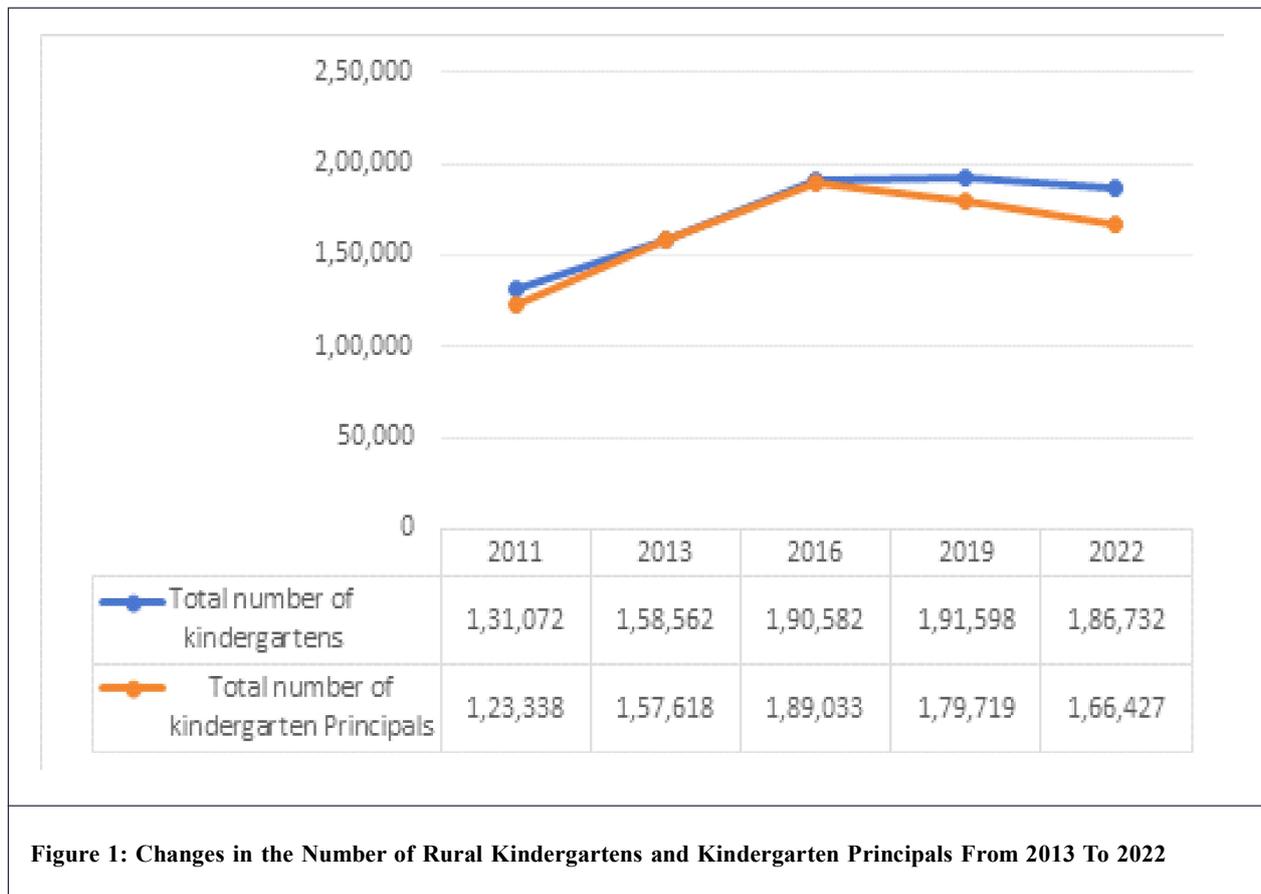


Figure 1: Changes in the Number of Rural Kindergartens and Kindergarten Principals From 2013 To 2022

The number of rural kindergartens in China has increased sharply since 2011, reflecting the success of the Three-Year Action Plans for Preschool Education. By 2019, the total reached 192,000 institutions, substantially expanding access to early childhood education and improving preschool enrollment in rural areas. By 2021, the gross enrollment rate for preschool education reached 88.1%, with rural kindergartens (including those in towns and villages) accounting for nearly two-thirds of all kindergartens nationwide (Wu et al., 2024).

By contrast, the number of kindergarten principals rose rapidly after 2011, peaked in 2016, and then declined in 2019 and 2022. Importantly, the total number of principals has consistently lagged behind the number of kindergartens, with the gap widening from about 12,000 in 2019 to roughly 20,000 in 2022. This trend underscores a deepening shortage of qualified principals in rural China.

3.2. Structural Indicators: Overall Optimization with Persistent Weaknesses in Private and Village-Level Kindergartens

The structural characteristics of kindergarten principals in poverty-alleviated rural regions were analyzed across seven dimensions: gender, age, years of experience, professional title, educational attainment, and field of study. These findings were contextualized using national data from the China Rural Education Development Report (2010–2020). To examine structural disparities, the sample was categorized into subgroups — public (coded 1) versus private (coded 2) kindergartens and township central (coded 1) versus village-level (coded 2) kindergartens, and corresponding differential analyses were conducted for each category.

3.2.1. Gender Composition: Pronounced Imbalance

Among the surveyed principals ($n = 1,386$), female principals accounted for 89.6%, while male principals represented only 10.4%. Chi-square tests revealed no statistically significant gender differences between public and private kindergartens or between township central and village-level kindergartens. Overall, these results highlight a pronounced gender imbalance across rural kindergarten leadership, reflecting the feminization trend commonly observed in early childhood education.

3.2.2. Age and Experience Profile: Generally Reasonable but Uneven Distribution

In terms of age, 0.4% of principals were under 24 years old, 69.2% were between 25 and 44, and 30.4% were over 45. According to the World Health Organization's definition of youth (ages 18–44 years), the principal workforce in these regions is predominantly young, reflecting recent national initiatives to inject “new blood” into poverty-alleviated areas. In terms of experience, 26.6% were novice principals (0–3 years), 43.9% had 4–10 years of experience, 15.5% had 11–15 years, and 14% had more than 15 years of experience.

The differential analysis revealed significant disparities in age and experience between the groups (Table 1). Principals in public kindergartens were significantly younger ($t = -7.1, p < 0.001$) and less experienced ($t = -17.9, p < 0.001$) than those in private kindergartens, a pattern likely influenced by recent “One Village, One Kindergarten” policy expansions and associated hiring demands. Similarly, principals in township central kindergartens were younger ($t = -5.79, p < 0.001$) and had fewer years of experience ($t = -10.9, p < 0.001$) than their village-level counterparts, indicating a relative lack of “new blood” in village-level settings.

3.2.3. Professional Titles: Suboptimal Distribution with Disparities in Private and Village-Level Kindergartens

In the total sample, 47.5% of principals held no professional titles, 20.6% held junior titles, 18.7% held intermediate titles, and 13.2% held senior titles. Overall, the professional title status of rural kindergarten principals is suboptimal, with nearly half lacking titles and a low proportion holding senior titles, which hinders the development of the principal workforce. “Increasing the proportion of senior titles among rural teachers is not only a professional demand for career development and skill enhancement but also a crucial means to attract and retain talented teachers, improve their salary and status, fundamentally enhance rural education quality, and promote urban-rural educational integration.”

The differential test for professional titles between public and private kindergarten principals yielded ($t = 26.14, p < 0.001$), indicating that public kindergarten principals held significantly higher titles than their private counterparts. Specifically, over 80% of untitled principals were from private kindergartens, whereas only 12% of those with senior titles were from private kindergartens. The test between township central and village-level kindergartens showed ($t = 18.77, p < 0.001$), with township principals holding significantly higher titles. Among all the untitled principals, 80% were from village-level kindergartens, whereas only 25% of those with senior titles were from village-level kindergartens.

3.2.4. Educational Attainment: Overall Improvement, but Private and Village-Level Kindergartens Have Fewer Highly Educated Principals

The 2018 Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Workforce Development in the New Era, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, proposed “gradually raising the educational requirements for kindergarten teachers to associate degrees.” In this study, 91.9% of rural kindergarten principals held an associate degree or higher compared to 86.15% in 2020, indicating an overall improvement in the educational qualifications of rural principals.

As presented in Table 1, the differential test for educational attainment between public and private kindergarten principals yielded ($t = 17.23, p < 0.001$), with public kindergarten principals being significantly more educated. Among principals with a bachelor's degree or higher, 79% were from public kindergartens, and only 21% were from private

Table 1: Structural Index Difference Analysis of Rural Kindergarten Principal Team in Poverty Alleviation Areas

	Public Kindergartens (n = 713)		Private Kindergartens (n = 673)				Township Center Kindergartens (n = 644)		Village Kindergartens (n = 742)			
	M	SD	M	SD	T	P	M	SD	M	SD	T	P
Age	4.31	1.35	4.79	1.16	-7.10***	0.00	4.33	1.32	4.72	1.23	-5.79***	0.00
Experience Profile	5.70	5.01	11.10	6.18	-17.95***	0.00	6.44	5.59	9.95	6.29	-10.90***	0.00
Professional Title	2.58	1.01	1.33	0.75	26.14 ***	0.00	2.50	1.04	1.51	0.92	18.77***	0.00
Educational Level	4.68	0.55	4.13	0.64	17.31***	0.00	4.68	0.53	4.19	0.67	14.97***	0.00

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

kindergartens. The test between township central kindergartens and village-level kindergartens showed ($t = 14.97$, $p < 0.001$), with township principals being significantly more educated. Among principals with a bachelor’s degree or higher, 65.4% were from township central kindergartens and 34.6% were from village-level kindergartens.

3.2.5. Professional Alignment: Generally Stable, but Public Kindergartens Exhibit a Higher Proportion of Non-Specialized Principals

In the sample, 77.2% of the principals graduated with a major in preschool or early childhood education, compared to 76.8% in 2020. The data indicate a marginal increase in professional alignment among rural kindergarten principals by March 2024, although the overall trend remains largely unchanged.

A chi-square test on the professional background of principals in public versus private kindergartens ($\chi^2 = 52.28$, $p < 0.001$) revealed a statistically significant difference. Notably, 30.7% of public kindergarten principals reported not having a background in preschool or early childhood education, compared to only 14.4% in private kindergartens. This discrepancy is closely tied to the reassignment policy established under the State Council’s Several Opinions on Current Preschool Education Development (2010), which increased the number of teachers transferred to public kindergartens to alleviate teacher shortages during the rapid expansion of preschool education. However, this policy has also introduced challenges to the professional development of non-specialized educators. No significant differences were found in the professional alignment between the principals of township central kindergartens and village-level kindergartens.

3.3. Quality Indicators: High Professional Identity Amid Supply–Demand Gaps in Working Conditions

This study assessed the quality of rural kindergarten principals in poverty-alleviated regions across four dimensions: qualification credentials, professional development, professional identity, and working conditions. Samples were grouped into public (coded 1) versus private (coded 2) and township central (coded 1) versus village-level (coded 2) for analysis.

3.3.1. Qualifications: Improvements Evident, Yet Compliance Not Universal

In the total sample, 91.9% of the principals completed principal qualification training and obtained the required certificate, while 8.1% had not. Regarding teaching credentials, 65.2% held kindergarten teacher certificates, 32.2% held primary or secondary certificates, 1.5% held university-level certificates, and 15.2% held other types of qualifications; 4% held no teaching certificate at all. Both the proportions without principal training and those without any teaching qualifications are lower than the 2019 figures (13.08% and 16.90%, respectively; Qu, 2022), indicating measurable progress. However, these figures still fall short of the requirements set by the Kindergarten Work Regulations (Ministry of Education, 2016), which mandate that principals possess both teaching qualifications and principal training certifications. Differential analysis revealed no significant differences in qualification status across kindergarten types or locations.

3.3.2. Professional Training: Prominent Supply–Demand Mismatch and Inequitable Access

This study examined the professional development of principals in terms of learning channels, training types, training levels, and perceived effectiveness (see Table 2). The findings revealed a pronounced misalignment between training supply and principal needs, with private and village-level kindergartens facing particularly limited opportunities and lower-tier training platforms.

Table 2: Professional Learning Channels and Training Status of Rural Kindergarten Principals in Poverty-Alleviation Areas

Professional Learning Channels Percentage (%)	Attending academic conferences 92.8	Self-reflective learning 35.8	Self-reflective learning 57.9	Academic qualification improvement 66.6	Peer exchange 55.8	Others 8.9
Training Types Percentage (%)	Qualification training 75.4	On-the-job upgrading training 55.0	Advanced training for backbone principals and special-topic/specialized training 81.4	Others 24.4	None 1.5	
Training Level Percentage (%)	Training organized by the Ministry of Education 55.9	Training organized by provincial education departments 34	Training organized by municipal education bureaus 59.2	Training organized by district/county education bureaus 73.8	Others 18.3	
Training Effects Percentage (%)	Renewing educational, child-related, and management concepts 92.4	Enriching kindergarten knowledge 77.6	Improving kindergarten management ability 79.7	Improving childcare and teaching ability 92.7	Improving research ability 62.0	Others 4.1

According to the survey, professional training represents the primary channel for professional learning among principals of rural kindergartens in poverty-alleviated areas, with 92.8% of principals participating, followed by peer exchange and academic upgrading. Concerning training types, advanced or specialized training for key principals was the most common (81.4%), followed by qualification training for principals (75.4%). Training was most frequently organized at the district/county level (73.8%), with municipal- and national-level training being less common and provincial-level training the least available (34%). Regarding perceived outcomes, principals reported the greatest gains in kindergarten management and operational capabilities (92.7%), followed by updates to educational, child-centered, and kindergarten management concepts (92.4%), as a result of the theoretical training.. Notably, a significant gap exists between the training that principals received and their expressed needs (Figure 2). Principals identified training on child



Figure 2: Ranking of Principal Training Needs

development characteristics and laws, as well as the design, implementation, and evaluation of care and education activities, as their most urgent needs. This supply–demand misalignment in professional training requires additional attention and resolution.

No significant differences were found between public and private kindergartens or between township central and village-level kindergartens in terms of professional learning pathways or the types of training attended. However, significant disparities emerged in training levels and effectiveness. Specifically, public kindergarten principals had significantly greater access to provincial-level training ($\chi^2 = 60.77, p < 0.001$), municipal-level training ($\chi^2 = 68.46, p < 0.001$), and county-level training ($\chi^2 = 15.05, p < 0.001$) compared to their private counterparts. Likewise, township central kindergartens participated more frequently in provincial-level ($\chi^2 = 42.22, p < 0.001$) and municipal-level training ($\chi^2 = 77.88, p < 0.001$) than village-level kindergartens, whereas the latter had greater access to county-level training ($\chi^2 = 11.49, p < 0.001$). These patterns indicate that principals in private kindergartens generally had fewer training opportunities than those in public kindergartens, whereas village-level principals had less access to high-level training. Additionally, significant differences were observed between groups in perceived training effectiveness, particularly regarding the item “training improves research ability.”

3.3.3. Professional Identity: Generally High but Lower among Public Kindergarten Principals

Professional identity was measured across three dimensions—namely, social support, occupational cognition, and occupational value—using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicated stronger agreement. Mean scores were 3.98, 3.70, and 4.08 for social support, occupational cognition, and occupational value, respectively, reflecting an overall high level of professional identity among rural kindergarten principals in poverty-alleviated regions.

The comparative analysis revealed no significant differences in professional identity between township central and village-level kindergartens. However, significant differences were observed between public and private kindergarten principals across multiple indicators. In the social support dimension, public principals reported significantly lower agreement on “I often feel respected as a principal” ($t = -5.2, p < 0.001$) and “My kindergarten work is valued by superiors” ($t = -2.93, p = 0.003$). In occupational cognition, public principals expressed significantly lower identification with the statement, “I have strong career development prospects” ($t = -4.02, p < 0.001$). Likewise, in occupational value, they exhibited lower agreement with “Working as a principal helps me realize my personal value” ($t = -2.71, p = 0.007$). Overall, professional identity was significantly lower among public kindergarten principals than their private counterparts.

3.3.4. Working Conditions: Tension Between Commitment and Attrition

The working conditions of principals were assessed through work engagement and turnover intention measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Work engagement was notably high ($M = 4.24$), with over 90% of the principals expressing a strong willingness to devote efforts to kindergarten development. However, turnover intention was also substantial: 46% considered leaving the profession, while 52.4% expressed a desire to transition out of administrative roles. No significant differences in turnover intention were found between township central and village-level kindergartens or between public and private kindergarten types, though private kindergarten principals showed a stronger tendency to leave their positions ($t = -2.03, p = 0.042$). These results highlight a pronounced tension between high engagement and strong attrition tendencies.

Income satisfaction, working hours, and work pressure were examined to identify the factors influencing turnover intention. The results showed that 78.2% of principals were satisfied with their income, 94.7% reported high work pressure, and 84.4% experienced excessive workloads, including during holidays. The correlation analysis revealed that income satisfaction, working hours, and work pressure were all significantly and positively associated with both career and job transition intentions (Table 3).

Notably, while the extant literature has consistently demonstrated a negative correlation between income satisfaction and turnover intention, this study reveals a counterintuitive positive relationship. Principal income satisfaction exhibited significant positive correlations with both career transition intention ($r = 0.167, p = 0.01$) and job transition intention ($r = 0.126, p = 0.01$). Further analysis suggests that this paradox may be explained by the finding that income satisfaction was positively associated with work pressure ($r = 0.175, p = 0.01$) and working hours ($r = 0.131, p = 0.01$), indicating that higher compensation comes at the expense of an intensified workload. This creates a fundamental tension between principals’ professional commitment and excessive job demand, placing them in a persistent dilemma between dedication and attrition. If left unaddressed, this contradiction threatens to undermine the workforce stability in these regions. These findings suggest that retention mechanisms focusing primarily on compensation are insufficient, highlighting the critical need for systematic workload reduction along with financial incentives.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficients Between Various Dimensions and Principal Turnover Intention

		My income satisfies me	The work pressure of being a kindergarten principal is extremely high	There are always endless tasks, and it is challenging to rest even on holidays	I want to leave the kindergarten and do not want to continue working in early childhood education	I want to leave the position of kindergarten principal and do not want to engage in administrative work
My income satisfies me	P	1	.175**	.131**	.167**	.126**
The work pressure of being a kindergarten principal is extremely high.	P		1	.674**	.203**	.243**
There are always endless tasks, and it is challenging to rest even on holidays	P			1	.375**	.376**

Note: *p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Combination of "Independent Funding + Stable Teaching Staff" Enhances The Attractiveness of Rural Kindergarten Principal Positions

First, provincial and municipal governments establish special support funds for rural preschool education, granting rural kindergarten principals autonomy in using these funds. Currently, district and county governments are the primary financiers of preschool education, with “70% of it will be implemented by governments below the county level” (Luo, 2010), making it difficult for financially weak districts and counties to invest adequately. Insufficient and untimely fund allocation for rural kindergartens often occurs, placing pressure on the normal operations of rural kindergartens. Therefore, in addition to the regular budget, provincial governments should create special support funds for preschool education in financially weak areas, while municipal governments should supplement districts and counties with limited financial resources. Districts and counties should prioritize funding for under-resourced kindergartens, grant principals autonomy over special funds, prevent misappropriation, and improve fund utilization efficiency.

Second, the teaching staff should be stabilized, the worries linked to rural kindergarten principals’ work should be addressed, and the availability of human resources should be sufficient. On the one hand, in the short term, for weak kindergartens located in remote areas with only “one teacher and half guarantee” or “one teacher without guarantee,” the urgent problem lies in the long-term shortage of teachers. On duty, teachers are overworked and physically and mentally exhausted, which brings many difficulties for the management of kindergarten principals. County-level finance should establish dedicated public welfare positions and provide temporary personnel to alleviate teacher shortages. In the long term, stabilizing rural kindergarten teacher teams requires enhancing the professional attractiveness of rural teachers. “The professional attractiveness of rural teachers mainly includes professional supply power, professional security power, and professional development power” (Zhao, 2019). Professional supply power refers to the delivery of talents to rural kindergartens. The key is that the establishment needs to be tilted to rural weak kindergartens to ensure “attracting.” Professional security power refers to improving the welfare of rural kindergarten teachers, optimizing the working environment and living conditions, and ensuring “staying.” Professional development power refers to providing rural kindergarten teachers with space and conditions for post-employment development, improving rural teachers’ professional happiness, and ensuring “willingness to stay.”

4.2. Optimization of weak kindergarten principal structure indicators through the combination of “opportunity priority + job rotation assistance”

First, high-quality development opportunities should be tilted towards village-level and private kindergarten principals. Surveys indicate that township center kindergarten principals have more access to municipal- and provincial-level training than village-level principals, and public kindergarten principals generally receive more training opportunities than private ones. Given their relative disadvantage in education, professional qualifications, and titles, weak principals are highly motivated to participate in training. Local education departments should prioritize high-level training opportunities for these principals. Additionally, peer exchanges and academic upgrades are vital for professional skill development. Departments should provide platforms and resources for weak principals to engage with demonstration kindergartens and enhance their academic qualifications.

Second, job rotation assistance can achieve secondary distribution of teachers in rural kindergartens. In 2014, the Ministry of Education and two other ministries issued the “Opinions on Promoting Exchange and Rotation of Principals and Teachers in Compulsory Education Schools in Counties (Districts),” mandating urban and high-quality schools to allocate at least 10% of eligible teachers for rotation, with backbone teachers accounting for at least 20% of exchanges. Local governments should establish incentives and guarantees for rotation, implement designated rotation and assistance for principals and key teachers from demonstration and township center kindergartens to private and village-level kindergartens, standardize assessment and management of assistance staff, and safeguard their rights and interests.

4.3. Optimization of Weak Kindergarten Principal Structure Indicators Through the Combination of “Opportunity Priority + Job Rotation Assistance”

First, local governments should strengthen collaborative governance, enhance cross-departmental and cross-organizational collaboration capabilities, and reduce principals’ work pressure. Increased inspections, supervision, and evaluations have expanded principals’ non-teaching responsibilities, compounding human resource shortages and straining financial and material resources. High-intensity workloads threaten principals’ physical and mental health and increase turnover risk. Collaborative burden reduction requires shared responsibility and resource sharing among functional departments. For instance, governments could hire third-party development think-tanks for rural preschool education, enabling departments to share resources, reduce non-teaching tasks, and engage industry experts to develop practical solutions for principal team construction and high-quality kindergarten development.

Second, post-employment training should shift from supply-driven to demand-driven approaches. Training is the main channel for kindergarten principals’ professional development. The Ministry of Education’s third three-year action plan specifies training based on actual needs to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Survey data indicate that principals urgently require training in children’s development characteristics, childcare activity design and evaluation, and kindergarten management. Training should involve on-the-job learning, on-site observation, offline centralized sessions, and other experiential methods, scheduled during winter and summer vacations or weekends to accommodate daily work routines.

5. Conclusion

Research and investigation have revealed a shortage in quantity indicators and a significant gap in the number of rural kindergarten principals in poverty-stricken areas. Overall structural indicators have improved, but private and village-level kindergartens remain relatively weak. While quality indicators demonstrate high professional identity, pronounced supply-demand contradictions persist in survival and development. These findings provide valuable insights for government policy and decision-making.

6. Limitations

This study has several noteworthy limitations:

First, the research relied primarily on questionnaire survey data. Although the sample size was substantial, the study was cross-sectional, which prevents establishing causal relationships or capturing the long-term evolution of rural kindergarten principal teams.

Second, regarding sample representativeness, although the study included 10 provinces, it did not cover all poverty-alleviated regions in China, particularly some deeply impoverished areas. Caution is therefore warranted when generalizing these findings to all former poverty-stricken regions.

Third, the methodological approach was predominantly quantitative. While effective for providing a macroscopic overview of the status quo and identifying problems, this approach lacks in-depth qualitative insights into principals' personal experiences, intrinsic motivations, contextual challenges, and the complexities of their management practices.

Finally, the measurement of key constructs were primarily based on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate objective indicators (e.g., precise income records and documented working hours) and multisource assessments (e.g., feedback from teachers and parents) to validate and enrich these findings.

Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest are reported by the authors.

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Ethics

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Education, Southwest University, China (Approval date: June 25, 2025). The research plan was deemed scientifically reasonable, fair, and impartial, with no ethical or legal conflicts.

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