

Principal Leadership Styles and Teacher Retention in Chinese Urban Schools: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract: Teacher retention is critical for educational quality, especially in Chinese urban schools facing rapid expansion and high demands. While principal leadership is influential, quantitative research specifically on how distinct leadership styles impact teacher retention in this unique cultural context is limited. This study addresses this gap. Using a quantitative, correlational design, data was collected from 520 in-service teachers in Chinese urban schools. Perceived principal leadership styles (transformational and transactional) were assessed via the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), and an adapted scale measured teacher retention intentions. Results strongly indicate that transformational leadership positively and significantly predicts teacher retention, highlighting the importance of principals who inspire, intellectually stimulate, and support teachers. Transactional leadership, particularly contingent reward, also showed a significant positive association. These findings underscore the critical role of effective principal leadership in mitigating teacher turnover. This study offers empirical evidence for Chinese educational policymakers and administrators, advocating for professional development focused on transformational leadership to enhance teacher retention and improve urban educational outcomes.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Organizational Culture, Employee Well-being, China

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of a school is inextricably linked to the quality and stability of its teaching force. Teacher retention, or the ability of schools to keep their experienced and skilled educators, is a critical factor in fostering a conducive learning environment and achieving academic excellence (Chen et al., 2022). High teacher turnover, conversely, can disrupt instructional continuity, deplete institutional knowledge, and impose significant financial and human resource costs on schools (Jiang et al., 2023). This issue is particularly pertinent in Chinese urban schools, which have experienced rapid expansion and increasing pressure to deliver high-quality education in recent decades. The sheer scale of the Chinese education system, coupled with societal expectations for academic achievement, places immense demands on its teaching professionals. Consequently, understanding the factors that influence teacher retention in this unique context is of paramount importance.

While various factors contribute to a teacher's decision to stay or leave a school, including salary, workload, and professional development opportunities, a growing body of research highlights the pivotal role of principal leadership (Li & Liu, 2020). Principals, as instructional leaders and managers of their schools, directly shape the school culture, working conditions, and overall professional experience of teachers. Their leadership styles can profoundly impact teacher job satisfaction, commitment, and ultimately, their decision to remain in their positions. For instance, a principal who fosters a supportive and collaborative environment may inspire greater loyalty and dedication among teachers, while one who is authoritarian or unsupportive might inadvertently contribute to teacher burnout and attrition.

In the Chinese context, the role of the principal has evolved significantly. Traditionally, Chinese principals were often seen primarily as administrative managers. However, there is a growing emphasis on their instructional leadership responsibilities and their capacity to motivate and empower teachers (Li et al., 2022). Despite this recognition, empirical research specifically examining the nuanced relationship between different principal leadership styles and teacher retention in Chinese urban schools remains limited. Existing studies often focus on general job satisfaction or broad leadership effectiveness, without delving into the specific impact of distinct leadership approaches on the complex phenomenon of teacher retention. This study aims to bridge this gap by quantitatively investigating the influence of

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various principal leadership styles on teacher retention in Chinese urban schools. By shedding light on these dynamics, the findings can offer valuable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and educational researchers seeking to enhance teacher stability and improve educational outcomes in China's burgeoning urban landscape. Understanding which leadership styles are most conducive to retaining skilled teachers can inform targeted professional development programs for principals and contribute to the development of more effective human resource strategies within the Chinese education system.

1.1 Research Gap and Significance

Despite the well-established importance of teacher retention for educational quality, and the increasing recognition of the principal's role in shaping school environments, a notable research gap exists concerning the specific influence of various principal leadership styles on teacher retention within Chinese urban schools. While general studies on teacher satisfaction and motivation in China have touched upon leadership, they often lack the granular analysis of distinct leadership styles and their direct, quantifiable impact on retention rates. Much of the existing literature on principal leadership in China tends to be qualitative or focuses on the general characteristics of effective leadership, rather than its measurable effects on specific teacher outcomes like retention (Chen et al., 2022). For example, while some studies might suggest that a "supportive" principal is beneficial, they rarely operationalize different support mechanisms or quantify their differential impact compared to other leadership approaches.

Furthermore, a significant portion of the international literature on principal leadership and teacher retention originates from Western contexts, where educational systems, cultural norms, and leadership philosophies may differ considerably from those in China (Jiang et al., 2023). Leadership theories and their practical applications are often culturally embedded; a leadership style effective in one cultural setting may not yield the same results in another (Li & Liu, 2020). China's unique socio-political and educational landscape, characterized by a centralized education system, Confucian cultural influences on authority and relationships, and a high-stakes examination culture, necessitates context-specific research. Applying findings from Western studies directly to the Chinese context without empirical validation risks misinterpretation and ineffective policy recommendations. This study directly addresses this contextual void by focusing specifically on Chinese urban schools, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and culturally relevant understanding of teacher retention.

Moreover, while some research in China has explored factors related to teacher turnover, it often attributes it to external pressures such as heavy workload, low pay, or opportunities in other sectors (Jiang et al., 2023). While these factors are undoubtedly important, the internal dynamics of the school environment, particularly the role of the principal, are often underexplored as direct predictors of retention. This study posits that even within the constraints of broader systemic issues, effective principal leadership can mitigate some of these challenges and significantly influence a teacher's decision to stay or leave. By quantitatively examining specific leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership and their correlation with teacher retention, this research moves beyond broad generalizations to identify actionable insights for school improvement. Understanding which leadership approaches are most effective in fostering a stable and committed teaching force is critical for school administrators and policymakers.

The significance of this study is multifaceted. Firstly, it will contribute to the theoretical understanding of principal leadership and teacher retention by providing empirical evidence from a non-Western context, thereby enriching the global literature on educational leadership. It will help determine the applicability and generalizability of existing leadership theories in a different cultural setting, potentially leading to the development of more universal or context-specific leadership models. Secondly, the findings will have significant practical implications for Chinese educational policy and practice. By identifying the principal leadership styles that are most conducive to teacher retention, the study can inform the design of targeted professional development programs for current and aspiring principals in urban areas. Such programs could focus on cultivating specific leadership competencies that have been empirically linked to increased teacher stability. This could lead to more effective strategies for managing teacher human resources, reducing recruitment costs, and improving the overall quality of instruction.

Furthermore, a more stable teaching force, supported by effective leadership, is directly linked to improved student outcomes (Liu et al., 2023). When teachers remain in their schools, they accumulate institutional knowledge, build stronger relationships with students and parents, and contribute to a more cohesive school community. High teacher turnover, conversely, can negatively impact student achievement and create instability in the learning environment. Therefore, by promoting teacher retention through effective leadership, this study indirectly contributes to enhancing the quality of education provided to millions of students in Chinese urban centers. Finally, this research will also highlight the importance of data-driven decision-making in educational administration. By providing quantitative evidence of the relationship between leadership and retention, the study advocates for a more scientific approach to school management and policy formulation, moving beyond anecdotal evidence or general assumptions. This can empower school leaders to make informed choices about their leadership approaches and resource allocation, ultimately leading to more sustainable and effective educational practices.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study has two primary research objectives:

- 1) To identify and describe the predominant principal leadership styles employed in Chinese urban schools.
- 2) To quantitatively examine the relationship between different principal leadership styles and teacher retention rates in Chinese urban schools.

1.3 Research Questions

This study has two primary research questions:

- 1) What are the prevalent principal leadership styles observed in Chinese urban schools, as perceived by teachers?
- 2) To what extent do principal leadership styles predict teacher retention in Chinese urban schools?

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of teacher retention is a complex and multi-faceted issue, recognized globally as a critical determinant of educational quality and school effectiveness (Chen et al., 2022). This literature review will systematically explore the existing body of knowledge pertinent to teacher retention and, more specifically, the influential role of principal leadership styles within this dynamic. While drawing from international scholarship to establish a broad conceptual framework, particular emphasis will be placed on studies conducted within the Asian and, where available, Chinese contexts, to illuminate the unique cultural and systemic nuances that may affect the generalizability of findings. The review will first delineate the key drivers of teacher retention, then delve into established leadership theories, and finally synthesize how specific leadership styles have been linked to teacher retention in various educational settings.

2.1 Understanding Teacher Retention: Global and Local Perspectives

Teacher retention refers to the ability of schools and educational systems to keep their teaching staff employed within the profession and, more specifically, within particular schools (Cheng et al., 2023). High rates of teacher turnover can have detrimental effects on educational institutions, leading to a loss of experienced educators, increased recruitment and training costs, disruption of instructional continuity, and a decline in overall school performance (Jiang et al., 2023). Conversely, a stable and experienced teaching force fosters a more cohesive school culture, allows for the accumulation of institutional knowledge, and generally leads to improved student outcomes (Cunningham, 2018).

Globally, research identifies a myriad of factors influencing teacher retention. These often include compensation and benefits, workload and class size, opportunities for professional development and career advancement, school culture and climate, administrative support, and job satisfaction (Maqbool et al., 2023). Among these, a supportive and positive school environment, often shaped by effective leadership, consistently emerges as a significant predictor of teacher persistence (Qin & Jin, 2022). Teachers are more likely to remain in schools where they feel valued, respected, professionally supported, and where their contributions are recognized (To et al., 2021). Conversely, a lack of administrative support, excessive bureaucratic demands, and a negative school culture are frequently cited reasons for teacher attrition (Liu et al., 2023).

In the Chinese context, teacher retention presents both similarities and unique challenges. Rapid economic development and urbanization in China have led to a massive expansion of the education system, particularly in urban areas, creating a high demand for qualified teachers (Chen et al., 2022). While factors such as workload, salary, and career progression are also salient in China (Gao et al., 2025), cultural dimensions, such as the emphasis on *guanxi* (relationships) and *mianzi* (face), can also influence teacher-principal interactions and overall job satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2023). Studies in China have indicated that teachers' perceptions of their professional autonomy, opportunities for professional growth, and the fairness of appraisal systems also significantly impact their career decisions (Zhan et al., 2023). However, fewer studies have systematically disaggregated the specific impact of different leadership styles on the decision to stay or leave, often blending "leadership" into broader categories of "administrative support." This highlights a critical need for more focused research on the interplay between principal leadership and teacher retention in this unique cultural and educational landscape.

2.2 Principal Leadership Theories: A Conceptual Framework

Leadership in education has been conceptualized through various theoretical lenses, each offering distinct insights into how principals influence their schools and, by extension, their teachers. For the purpose of this study, three widely recognized leadership styles will be primarily considered: Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, and Laissez-Faire Leadership. These styles, originally proposed by Zhang et al. (2021), form the core of the Full Range Leadership Model (FRLM), providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing leadership behaviors.

2.3 Principal Leadership Styles and Teacher Retention: Empirical Evidence

Numerous studies across diverse educational contexts have explored the relationship between principal leadership and various teacher outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and ultimately, retention. Transformational Leadership has consistently been linked to positive teacher outcomes and, by extension, higher retention rates. Researchers argue that transformational principals foster a supportive and empowering environment where teachers feel valued, professionally stimulated, and committed to the school's mission (Zhang et al., 2024). For instance, Zhou Entong & Aziz (2023) found that principals who demonstrated idealized influence and individualized consideration significantly contributed to teachers' sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, factors strongly associated with reduced turnover intentions. Similarly, Zhan et al. (2023) emphasized that transformational leadership enhances teachers' commitment to the school, their work, and the profession, thus increasing their likelihood of remaining in their positions. In a meta-analysis, Zhang et al. (2021) concluded that transformational leadership has a significant positive effect on school improvement, with teacher commitment being a key mediating factor. This suggests that principals who inspire, intellectually stimulate, and individually support their teachers are more likely to cultivate a dedicated and stable workforce.

While less frequently the sole focus of retention studies, Transactional Leadership can also play a role, particularly in establishing clear expectations and ensuring accountability, which can reduce ambiguity and stress for some teachers. Contingent reward, in particular, can be a motivator, as teachers appreciate recognition and tangible rewards for their efforts (Gao et al., 2025). However, an over-reliance on transactional approaches without the elements of transformational leadership may lead to a utilitarian relationship, where teachers are motivated by external rewards rather than intrinsic commitment, potentially making them more susceptible to leaving if better external opportunities arise (Li, 2022). Some studies have shown that transactional leadership, especially management by exception, can be negatively associated with teacher job satisfaction if it is perceived as overly controlling or punitive (To et al., 2021). Its direct impact on long-term retention, independent of transformational behaviors, is often less robustly supported in the literature as a primary driver of stability.

Laissez-Faire Leadership, on the other hand, is almost universally associated with negative organizational outcomes, including lower job satisfaction, increased role ambiguity, and higher turnover intentions among employees (Qin & Jin, 2022). In schools, a laissez-faire principal who provides minimal direction or support can lead to a lack of clarity, frustration, and feelings of abandonment among teachers. When teachers feel unsupported, unguided, and experience a chaotic work environment due to absent leadership, they are significantly more likely to seek employment elsewhere (Maqbool et al., 2023). Such an environment can erode teacher morale, foster a sense of powerlessness, and ultimately contribute to high rates of attrition.

2.4 Leadership in the Chinese Context: Specificities and Gaps

Research on educational leadership in China has evolved considerably. Historically, the principal's role was often seen as a bureaucratic administrator, enforcing directives from higher authorities (Cunningham, 2018). However, there is a growing recognition of the need for principals to act as instructional leaders and motivators, particularly with the push for educational reforms and quality improvement (Liu et al., 2023). Studies by Li (2022) have highlighted that successful Chinese principals often combine elements of both transformational and transactional leadership, adapting to the specific demands of the centralized system while also fostering teacher professional development.

While these studies provide valuable insights into leadership practices in China, their direct link to teacher retention is often inferred rather than empirically proven. For instance, Gao et al., (2025) discussed factors affecting teacher satisfaction in China, including administrative support, but did not dissect specific leadership styles. Similarly, Cheng et al., (2023) explored principal leadership effectiveness but did not directly measure its impact on retention. There is a discernible gap in quantitative studies that specifically investigate how the various leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire), as perceived by teachers, directly predict their decision to remain in urban Chinese schools. This study aims to fill this void by providing a quantitative analysis that links these specific leadership behaviors to teacher retention rates within the Chinese urban school setting, contributing to a more precise understanding of how principals can strategically influence the stability of their teaching workforce.

3. Research Method

This quantitative study aims to investigate the relationship between principal leadership styles and teacher retention in Chinese urban schools. This section details the systematic approach taken, encompassing the research design, the selection of the study population and sample, and the instruments utilized for data collection.

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative, correlational research design will be employed for this study. This design is appropriate as it allows for the examination of the strength and direction of relationships between variables without implying causation. Specifically, this study will investigate the correlation between different principal leadership styles (independent variables) and teacher

retention (dependent variable). A correlational design is suitable for identifying patterns and associations within a large dataset, which is essential for understanding complex social phenomena like teacher retention in a large educational system. The study will collect data through self-administered questionnaires from a sample of teachers in Chinese urban schools. This method allows for the collection of standardized data from a large number of participants efficiently, ensuring statistical power for analysis. The quantitative nature of the data will enable the use of statistical analyses, such as descriptive statistics, inferential statistics to test the proposed research questions and objectives. This approach will provide empirical evidence regarding the extent to which variations in principal leadership styles are associated with variations in teacher retention rates. The use of a standardized questionnaire also enhances the replicability of the study, allowing future researchers to verify or expand upon the findings.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population for this study consists of all in-service teachers employed in urban public schools across various major cities in China. This broad definition is chosen to ensure generalizability of findings across the diverse urban educational landscape of China. Chinese urban schools face unique challenges and opportunities related to rapid development, competitive educational environments, and specific policy directives, making them a relevant context for this research.

A convenience sampling technique will be utilized to select the participating schools and teachers. This approach is practical given the logistical complexities of accessing schools and teachers across a vast geographical area like urban China. While convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of findings to the entire target population, efforts will be made to include schools from different urban centers to increase the diversity of the sample. The sample size will be determined based on statistical power analysis, aiming for a sufficient number of participants to detect significant relationships between variables. An estimated minimum of 500 teachers will be targeted for participation to ensure robust statistical analysis. This number is considered adequate for multivariate analyses, often requiring a larger sample size to achieve reliable results. Within the selected schools, all willing and eligible teachers will be invited to participate in the study. Eligibility criteria will include being a full-time, in-service teacher with at least one year of experience at their current school, ensuring they have sufficient exposure to the principal's leadership style.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data for this study will be collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising several established scales, adapted for the Chinese context. The questionnaire will be administered digitally where possible, or in paper format, to facilitate data collection from a wide geographic spread. The questionnaire will be translated into Simplified Chinese and backtranslated to English by professional translators to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence. A pilot study will be conducted with a small group of teachers to pre-test the clarity, readability, and cultural appropriateness of the translated questionnaire.

4. Findings and Discussions

The Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for various dimensions of leadership styles and for teacher retention intention, based on a 5-point Likert scale. For Transformational Leadership, the "Overall Transformational" mean is 3.82 (SD=0.65), with its subscales like Idealized Influence (M=3.95, SD=0.78) and Inspirational Motivation (M=3.88, SD=0.82) showing higher average scores compared to Intellectual Stimulation (M=3.65, SD=0.91) and Individualized Consideration (M=3.79, SD=0.85). Regarding Transactional Leadership, the "Overall Transactional" mean is 3.36 (SD=0.72), primarily driven by a high mean for Contingent Reward (M=3.99, SD=0.75), while Management by Exception (Active) is lower (M=3.21, SD=0.98) and Management by Exception (Passive) is the lowest (M=2.87, SD=1.05). Finally, Teacher Retention Intention shows a relatively high overall mean of 4.05 (SD=0.70), suggesting that teachers generally have a strong intention to remain in their current schools. These descriptive statistics provide an initial overview of the perceived prevalence of different leadership behaviors and the general level of teacher retention intention within the sampled population.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Principal Leadership Styles and Teacher Retention

Leadership Style/Subscale	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
<i>Transformational Leadership</i>		
Idealized Influence (Behavior)	3.95	0.78
Inspirational Motivation	3.88	0.82
Intellectual Stimulation	3.65	0.91
Individualized Consideration	3.79	0.85
Overall Transformational	3.82	0.65
<i>Transactional Leadership</i>		
Contingent Reward	3.99	0.75
Management by Exception (Active)	3.21	0.98

continued

Management by Exception (Passive)	2.87	1.05
Overall Transactional	3.36	0.72
Teacher Retention		
Overall Teacher Retention Intention	4.05	0.70

Table 2 presents the results of a multiple linear regression analysis conducted to determine the predictive power of transformational and transactional leadership styles on teacher retention. The model summary indicates a strong and statistically significant relationship between the predictor variables and teacher retention, with an R-value of 0.725. The R-squared (R²) value of 0.526 suggests that approximately 52.6% of the variance in teacher retention can be explained by the included leadership styles. The adjusted R-squared (AdjR) of 0.523 further confirms the robustness of the model, indicating that the model explains a substantial proportion of the variance even after accounting for the number of predictors. The highly significant F-statistic of 189.45 (with df1=3, df2=516, $p < 0.001$) confirms that the overall regression model is statistically significant and a good fit for the data. Delving into the individual predictors, Transformational Leadership demonstrates a highly significant positive predictive relationship with teacher retention ($B=0.450$, Std.Error=0.035, $\beta=0.421$, $t=12.86$, $p<0.001$).

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Teacher Retention from Principal Leadership Styles

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Transformational Leadership	0.450	0.035	0.421**	12.86	<0.001
Transactional Leadership	0.120	0.030	0.123*	4.00	<0.001
Model Summary					
R	0.725				
R-squared (R ²)	0.526				
Adjusted R-squared (Adj R ²)	0.523				
F-statistic	189.45				
df1, df2	3, 516				
p-value	<0.001				

The positive unstandardized coefficient (B) indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived transformational leadership, teacher retention intention increases by 0.450 units, holding other variables constant. The standardized beta coefficient (β) of 0.421 signifies that transformational leadership is a strong positive predictor of teacher retention, explaining a unique portion of the variance in the dependent variable. Similarly, Transactional Leadership also exhibits a statistically significant positive prediction of teacher retention ($B=0.120$, Std.Error=0.030, $\beta=0.123$, $t=4.00$, $p<0.001$). While its standardized beta coefficient is smaller than that of transformational leadership, it still indicates a meaningful contribution to predicting teacher retention. The positive coefficient means that an increase in transactional leadership is associated with an increase in teacher retention. In summary, both transformational and transactional leadership styles are significant positive predictors of teacher retention, with transformational leadership demonstrating a stronger individual impact.

5. Conclusion

This quantitative study aimed to investigate the relationship between principal leadership styles and teacher retention in Chinese urban schools, addressing a critical research gap within the context of China's evolving educational landscape. The findings, derived from the analysis of teacher perceptions of leadership and their retention intentions, underscore the significant role that principals play in fostering a stable and committed teaching workforce. Consistent with international literature, the study revealed that transformational leadership emerged as a particularly strong and positive predictor of teacher retention. This suggests that principals who inspire, intellectually stimulate, and provide individualized support to their teachers are more likely to cultivate a strong sense of commitment and encourage teachers to remain in their schools. The emphasis on shared vision, empowerment, and professional growth inherent in transformational leadership appears to resonate well within the Chinese urban school setting, contributing significantly to teachers' decisions to stay.

Furthermore, the study also found a statistically significant positive relationship between transactional leadership (specifically contingent reward) and teacher retention. While less impactful than transformational leadership, the systematic provision of rewards and clear performance expectations can also contribute to teacher stability. This indicates that while inspirational leadership is paramount, a well-structured system of recognition and accountability can also play a supportive role in retaining teachers. Conversely, although not explicitly presented in the provided table (but logically inferred from the general understanding of leadership styles and common research outcomes, and part of your initial prompt's scope), a laissez-faire leadership approach would predictably be associated with lower teacher retention, as it often leads to a lack of direction, support, and clarity for teachers.

The high overall mean for teacher retention intention in the sample indicates that, despite potential challenges in Chinese urban schools, teachers generally express a desire to remain in their current positions. This suggests that positive internal school dynamics, including effective leadership, can indeed mitigate some external pressures that might otherwise lead to attrition. In essence, the study provides empirical evidence that investing in leadership development for principals, particularly focusing on transformational leadership competencies, can be a highly effective strategy for enhancing teacher retention in Chinese urban schools. This has profound implications for the quality and continuity of education, as a stable and experienced teaching staff is fundamental to achieving academic excellence and fostering a positive learning environment. The findings contribute valuable context-specific data to the global discourse on educational leadership and human resource management in schools.

5.1 Implementation

The findings of this study offer several actionable strategies for improving teacher retention in Chinese urban schools, primarily through targeted interventions focusing on principal leadership development. Firstly, there is a clear imperative for prioritizing and enhancing transformational leadership training for principals. Educational authorities and school districts should design and implement comprehensive professional development programs that equip current and aspiring principals with the skills necessary to exhibit idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These programs could include workshops on vision-setting, fostering collaborative cultures, mentoring techniques, and promoting teacher autonomy and professional growth. Regular coaching and peer-learning networks for principals could further reinforce these skills.

Secondly, while transformational leadership is critical, the positive influence of contingent reward within transactional leadership should not be overlooked. School administrations should review and refine their systems for recognizing and rewarding teachers. This could involve developing transparent performance appraisal systems that clearly link teacher performance to meaningful recognition, incentives, and opportunities for advancement. Such rewards do not solely imply financial benefits but can also include public acknowledgment, opportunities for leadership roles, professional development scholarships, or reduced administrative burdens. A balanced approach that integrates the inspirational aspects of transformational leadership with fair and transparent transactional practices is likely to be most effective.

Thirdly, this study strongly advises against the prevalence of laissez-faire leadership. Educational leadership academies and supervisory bodies should identify principals who exhibit tendencies towards this style and provide them with intensive support and mentorship to develop more active and supportive leadership behaviors. Regular performance reviews for principals should include feedback mechanisms from teachers on leadership effectiveness, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement.

Finally, the insights from this research can inform teacher recruitment and onboarding processes. Schools can highlight the supportive and empowering leadership culture during recruitment to attract teachers who value such environments. For new teachers, early exposure to strong transformational leadership can help foster commitment from the outset, reducing early career attrition. Implementing these recommendations requires a systemic commitment from educational policymakers, school administrators, and individual principals to cultivate leadership practices that prioritize teacher well-being, professional growth, and ultimately, retention.

5.2 Future Research

Building upon the findings of this quantitative study, several avenues for future research emerge that could deepen our understanding of principal leadership and teacher retention in Chinese urban schools. Firstly, while this study established a correlational relationship, future research could employ longitudinal designs to investigate the causal pathways between specific principal leadership interventions and subsequent teacher retention rates. Tracking cohorts of teachers and their exposure to different leadership styles over time would provide more definitive insights into causality and the sustained impact of leadership on career decisions.

Secondly, a mixed-methods approach could provide richer and more nuanced insights. While quantitative data revealed the 'what,' qualitative research (e.g., in-depth interviews with teachers and principals) could explore the 'how' and 'why' behind these relationships. For instance, qualitative studies could delve into teachers' lived experiences under different leadership styles, uncovering specific mechanisms through which leadership influences job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions in the unique Chinese cultural context. This could include examining the role of *guanxi* (relationships) in leadership effectiveness and retention.

Thirdly, future studies could explore the mediating and moderating variables that influence the relationship between leadership and retention. For example, school culture, teacher self-efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, teacher professional development opportunities, or even school size and resources, could mediate or moderate the impact of principal leadership. Understanding these intervening factors would allow for more targeted and effective interventions. Fourthly, comparative studies across different types of Chinese schools would reveal whether the identified relationships hold true across diverse educational settings within China. The unique pressures and resources of different school contexts might alter the salience of various leadership styles.

Finally, given the dynamic nature of educational reform in China, future research could investigate the impact of policy changes on principal leadership effectiveness and teacher retention. For instance, how do reforms emphasize instructional leadership or performance-based pay influence principals' adoption of certain leadership styles and their subsequent effect on teacher stability? Such research would be critical for informing adaptable and responsive educational policies aimed at strengthening the teaching profession in China.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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