

# The Determinants of Special-Post Teacher Attrition in Western China

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**Abstract:** This research focus on the social problems of high turnover rate of special post teachers serving rural schools in Western China. This research aims at investigating the factors decreasing the retention of special post teachers in Western China. To achieve this research aim, the researcher adopts qualitative research method, interview research strategy, carrying interviews with 12 special post teachers working in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, to investigate the factors that would arouse their intention to leave their present working position. This research finds that in the 12 special post teachers interviewed, 8 of them have significant tendency to leave, which is positively corresponding to the reality of high turnover rate of special post teacher in China. The special post teacher's intention to leave is influenced by seven dilemmas, namely separation between spouses, high work pressure, low social status, children education and companionship, low salary, poor natural environment, and the lack of sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** Special Post Teachers; High Turnover Rate; Retention Factors; Western China

## 1. Context

"Special Post Plan" is the abbreviation for the special post plan for school teachers in the rural compulsory education stage in China<sup>[12]</sup>. By publicly recruiting college graduates to teach in compulsory education schools in rural areas in western China, who are called as special post teacher, the problem of insufficient rural teachers in China has been gradually solved. This has important significance for improving the overall quality of rural teachers. Taking Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as an example, since the implementation of the "Special Post Plan" in 2006 for 13 years, a total of 67,381 special post teachers have been recruited in primary and secondary schools, covering more than 90% of rural schools and serving as rural school teachers<sup>[12]</sup>.

Teachers encounter various difficulties and obstacles in the process of work, resulting in their willingness to stick to their jobs reduces, making them feel that there is a deviation from their values in the plight of their work, resulting in a negative feeling of lack of mission<sup>[5]</sup>. The mission not only represents the sense of responsibility in the professional identity of teachers, but also includes their original intention to choose the position of "special post teacher", such as avoiding the pressure of employment, relieving economic difficulties and so on. Whether the decision of departure is aroused depends on whether the material and spiritual needs can be met<sup>[11]</sup>. When the two needs are met, the willingness to leave will be suppressed, and the teacher will not choose to leave; if the needs are not effectively satisfied, the teacher's willingness to leave will be aroused to some extent, and the teacher will need to make a difficult choice between staying and leaving<sup>[3][11]</sup>.

## 2. Research questions

The high turnover rate (75.2%) of special post teachers in rural schools in western China is a problem worthy of attention<sup>[2]</sup>. Although a large number of special post teachers are recruited every year, there is still a shortage of teachers in rural schools. Therefore, this research focuses on a research question that Why there are high turnover rate of special post teachers in Western China? There are two sub-research questions.

Q1: What are the factors decreasing the retention of special post teachers in Western China?

Q2: How do these factors take role to make special post teacher to leave?

### 3. Methodology

Between positivism and interpretivism, this research chooses interpretivism as research philosophy this research obeys. Compared to looking for the objective law of the world that positivism demands, interpretivism advocates understanding the motivation and influence of human being to build the world<sup>[10]</sup>. Interpretivism requires researchers to use their own concept systems and mindsets to interpret research objects<sup>[10]</sup>. In this research, the retention and departure of special post teachers are human's behavior, and different teachers have different decisions and different consideration. Researchers need to grasp the motivation of special post teachers by collecting and analyzing data from them, so as to make a reasonable explanation of their behavior. Thus, interpretivism is more suitable in this research.

Based on intepretivism, interview is adopted as research strategy of this research. Interview method is the basic research strategy of understanding the interviewee's psychology and behavior through communication, etc.<sup>[8]</sup>. In this research, compared with questionnaire surveys and focus group, individual interviews can be used to understand the special post teachers' thoughts and feelings in more detail. Therefore, individual interview is adopted.

### 4. Research design

#### 4.1 Research method

Since the interpretivism and interview are adopted, between quantitative method and qualitative method, qualitative method is chosen, which obeys the interpretivism and interview<sup>[1]</sup>. It refers to the method by which researchers use historical review, literature analysis, interviews, observations, and participation experience to obtain research data, and use non-quantitative methods to analyze the data to obtain research conclusions<sup>[1]</sup>. The focus of this research is not on operating variables or answering questions by verifying hypotheses. It is more about describing the social phenomenon of high turnover rate of special post teachers and understanding teachers' mental activity of retaining or leaving their posts, and then turning research into opinions, feelings, and experiences. Therefore, qualitative method is more suitable.

The advantages of qualitative method are that the information obtained is relatively rich, which can give researchers a larger interpretation space, to understand the research phenomenon and obtain a creative research findings<sup>[10]</sup>. Qualitative research also has its disadvantages. Because the collected data is based on the personal observation of the researcher, so that the research findings might not objective enough because of the personal bias of the researcher<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, it is important to guarantee the validity of the process and result of qualitative research. Based on qualitative method, interview is used to collect primary qualitative data from special post teachers.

#### 4.2 Sampling method

Table 1: Basic information of potential fugitives

	Gender	Education	Working life as special post teachers
T1	Female	Bachelor	2
T2	Female	Bachelor	3
T3	Male	Bachelor	1
T4	Female	Bachelor	5
T5	Female	Junior college	2
T6	Male	Junior college	2
T7	Female	Bachelor	1
T8	Female	Bachelor	3

Convenience sampling method and snowball sampling method are used. Researcher has two high school classmates who are serving as special post teachers in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Therefore, the two teachers are invited in the interview. In order to enlarge the number of interviewees, researcher asks the two high school classmates to introduce other special post teachers they know to participate in the interview. Finally, 20 individual interviews with 12 special post teachers in Alar,

Tiemenguan, and Kashgar in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region are carried out by WeChat, which is a popular online video and communication APP in China. Each interview is carried out for about 5 minutes. Among them, 8 teachers showed a tendency to leave. This research refers to these teachers as potential fugitives (see Table 1).

#### **4.3 Ethics**

The research strictly abides by the research ethical principles. Firstly, all the interviewees are not forced but voluntary. Secondly, no private information of the interviewees are collected. Thirdly, all the data collected will only be used by researcher oneself, and to be permanently deleted in half a year. Fourthly, there is no potential harm to the interviewees.

#### **4.4 Validity**

Interviewer bias, as an important factor influencing the validity of research, refers to the interviewer's own factors that cause the validity of the interview data to decrease, such as the interviewer's own opinions, values, expectations and prejudices <sup>[1]</sup>. In order to improve the validity of the interviews in this study, structured interviews are used in this research. There are five structured questions in this interview (see Table 2). Interviewees are asked to answer five questions, and the third to fifth questions are designed around teachers' life satisfaction, professional development, and interpersonal relationships (question c-e)

*Table 2: Interview questions*

a	How long have you been serving as a special post teacher? Why did you choose to be a special post teacher?
b	Do you want to leave or retain in the near future?
c	Are you satisfied with your life now as serving as a special post teacher? Why or why not?
d	Does working as a special post teacher helps you develop your profession? Why or why not?
e	Does working as a special post teacher impact your interpersonal relationships? Why or why not?

#### **4.5 Data collection and analysis**

The data collected in the interviews is compiled and analyzed using Nvivo 11.0 software <sup>[1]</sup>. The conversation, as the primary data collected in the interviews, is transcribed the audio data collected from the interview into textual materials, and is analyzed and sorted out by a three-level coding form (see Table 3).

*Table 3: Example of data coding*

First-level coding	Second-level coding	Third-level coding
After my children studying in primary school in the future, I will apply for a job back in the city, so that I can take and pick them between school and home. At that time, I'm very likely to give up my present job.	Don't want to be separated from children	Children's education and companionship
I haven't thought about to get married and settle here. But if I get married here, I would stay here forever. The thought of staying here for a lifetime is still a little bit uncomfortable.	Is not comfortable to stay in rural school	Personal development needs
The prices of the houses near the school are very high, so it is very difficult to buy a house here. The price of food is too high now.	Low salary of teacher	Low salary

### **5. Research results**

#### **5.1 Analysis of the subject words for the departure of special post teachers**

Through the analysis of the interview materials, it is found that 12 potential fugitives have different considerations. These considerations are classified and coded, and the entries that appeared 5 times or more were retained to screen out. Thus, 10 influencing factors of departure of special post teachers are

obtained (see Figure 1).

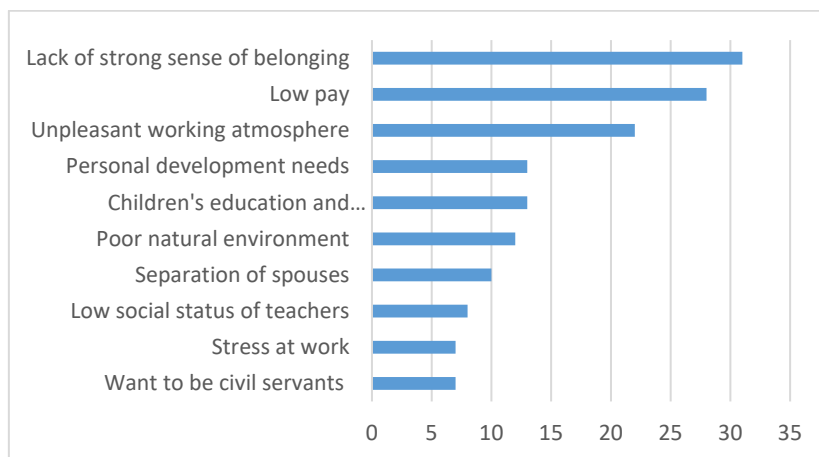


Figure 1: Word frequency related to departure of special post teachers

It can be seen from Figure 1 that the first five high-frequency terms are: lack of sense of belonging, low salary, unpleasant working atmosphere, personal development needs, and children's education and companionship.

## 5.2 Seven dilemmas facing potential fugitives

Nvivo 11.0 software is used to further organize the above 10 subject words. Clustering analysis is used to merge and adapt terms with similar or identical meanings to obtain the seven major difficulties faced by potential fugitives (see Figure 2).

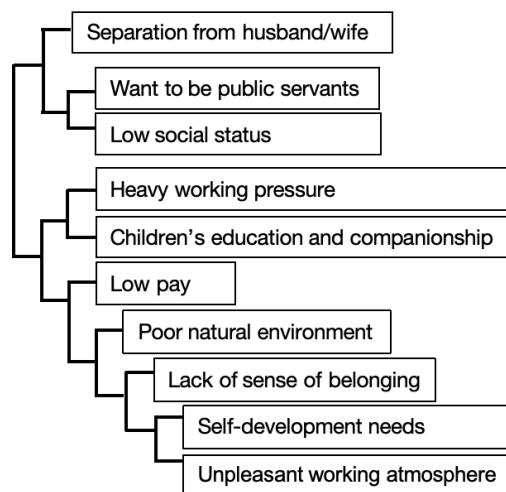


Figure 2: Clustering analysis

### 5.2.1 Separation of the spouse

In the 12 special post teachers in the interview, of which 10 are female teachers. Some of them still maintained the traditional concept that women should be family-oriented. The spouse's place of work is an important influencing factor determining whether they leave their jobs and re-select a job (Appendix 1: T4). Male teachers also face the similar problem of spouses. Teachers who are separated from the spouse, their spiritual needs cannot be met, which will arouse their tendency to leave (Appendix 2: T6).

### 5.2.2 Low social status of teachers

Special post teachers draw the conclusion that teachers have a low social status through their intuitive feelings of high demands on teachers and discrimination in the occupations of teacher (Appendix 3: T6). Improving social status is the need for teachers' self-esteem, and it is also a spiritual factor affecting teachers' retention. Teachers who feel that their social status is low will evoke a

intention to leave (Appendix 4: T8).

### **5.2.3 High pressure**

For any job, excessive stress can make people not experience the joy and passion of work. The interview finds that most young teachers are under tremendous pressure from students' performance. Poor student performance can lead to negative effects such as student parents' incomprehension, lower school assessment scores, and reduced performance wages. In the long run, teachers' work enthusiasm is dampened, which will even arouse teachers' intention to leave (Appendix 5: T2).

### **5.2.4 Children's education and company**

Teachers have the dual status as educator and parents, and this dual status will inevitably lead to conflicts. When conflicts occur, teachers face the choice of focusing on work or taking care of the family (Appendix 6: T1). Some of the special post teachers would like to leave rural areas where education, medical care and other conditions are relatively backward in order to provide a better living environment for the next generation. The education and companionship of children is the spiritual aspect of the factors affecting the teacher's intention to leave (Appendix 7: T7).

### **5.2.5 Low salary**

Salary is the material basis for the survival of special post teachers and also directly affects the stability of the entire rural teacher team <sup>[7]</sup>. Teachers' perception of salary levels comes more from the needs of daily life. When the salary is too low, special post teachers' basic life cannot be guaranteed, and the teacher will have the idea of leaving to pursue a higher salary (Appendix 8: T5).

### **5.2.6 Poor natural environment**

A healthy body is a prerequisite for efficient work. The harsh natural environment not only damages the body, but also destroys the will of the person. Teachers' pursuit of a comfortable environment influences their departure choices. The harsh natural environment can also be an inalterable material factor affecting teachers' retention or departure. (Appendix 8: T7).

### **5.2.7 Lack of sense of belonging**

Teachers in remote areas have a lack of belonging due to various factors such as psychological imbalance, rigid interpersonal relationships, poor school management, poor school running conditions, and inadequate policy guarantees, etc. <sup>[13]</sup>. Once they have a better opportunity, they will choose to leave without a doubt. The interview finds that many special post teachers have low sense of belonging (Appendix 10: T4 & Appendix 11: T2). It is also the main spiritual influencing factor of the teacher's decision to stay or leave.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

The special post teacher's intention to leave is influenced by seven dilemmas, namely separation between spouses, high work pressure, low social status, children education and companionship, low salary, poor natural environment, and the lack of sense of belonging. The seven dilemmas involve the material and spiritual needs of teachers in their daily work and life. The research findings completely answer the research questions.

### **6.2 Limitation and future research**

Firstly, this research only takes the special post teachers in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as research objects, and thus the research conclusion might not be general enough. Secondly, this research does not distinguish the retention and departure of teachers with different demographics. Thirdly, the total samples in the interview is not that many, resulting in the research findings not persuasive sufficiently. In the future, it is expected that the number of research samples of investigation can be enlarged, the areas of study and be enlarged and scattering, and the retention and departure of different teachers with different demographics can be compared.

### 6.3 Suggestions

Firstly, from perspective of policies, government can provide special post teachers with preferential policies in terms of pensions, housing, and children's enrollment, assist teachers to solve family problems, and allow teachers to stay in rural schools [6]. Secondly, from perspective of government, financial allocation and local subsidies, etc. can be carried out to increase the salary of special post teachers to retain them [9]. Thirdly, in terms of schools, schools can carry out various activities on holidays, enrich the amateur life of special post teachers, strengthening the emotional communication between teachers, strengthen their connection with the school to create a sense of belonging, and to retain people's feelings<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 7. Reflective account

In this study, doing a complete study requires the following steps. First of all, in the combination of personal interests and related social issues, I have identified the research question. Then, according to the research questions, and the comparison of the shortcomings of different research methods, I choose the research methods suitable for this research. Then, on the basis of determining the research method, I design more reasonable and rigorous research steps, including the questions of interview, the solution of ethical issues, the process of data collection, and the process of data analysis, etc. Finally, by analyzing the collected data, the results of this study are obtained. Through this research, my biggest gain is to learn how to collect primary data and analyze primary data, so as to get the results. This has had an important impact on my various future studies. However, this research only carried out qualitative research. In the future, I will carry out the study and practice of quantitative research.

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### Appendix

Some answers of interviewees

Appendix 1: I am from Aksu, and my husband is there. Not just me, but some teacher else. We four female teachers are separated from husbands on weekdays. For example, and the husband of a female

colleague is in Shaya. They meet once or twice a month. (T4)

Appendix 2: Like a physical education teacher, his girlfriend is in the Chinese Mainland, but worked here alone far away from his family, so he left about three months ago. He is a very good teacher, such a pity. (T6)

Appendix 3: Being a teacher... now the society has high expectations for teachers, but the social status of teachers is very low. This is a particularly contradictory thing. The status of teachers is also a problem of the whole society. As a teacher, if you make a little mistake, you will be accused by others. For example, there is now some public opinion about how a teacher not offer her seat to others. However, isn't a teacher sick? Doesn't a teacher pays for the bus? The society is demanding of us, but our salary is low (T8).

Appendix 4: After becoming a teacher, I feel that my friends working at other units just look down on me. Anyway, teacher's social status is low, I don't know what the reason is. Sometimes being a teacher means being laughed at. For example, a relative of mine, who is a civil servant, is proud to say that "I am a civil servant, you are a teacher". He just looks down on me and think that the teacher has a low social status. It seems that teacher is a honorable occupation, but in fact most people don't think so. (T3)

Appendix 5: There is only one music class each week. I have to teach the content equivalent of three lessons to students in one class. Although I have compressed one class into three or four lessons, the students can't keep up, and their results are not good. This is why the music teacher I mentioned before only stayed here for half a year. (T2)

Appendix 6: I can't guarantee that whether I will get out of here when one day I have a better job opportunity, or I'm offered a better environment. But I have to say that I have to consider for the next generation. If I can work in a place that can provide better environment to children's education, it is inevitable I will choose to work in that place. (T1)

Appendix 7: I like my job now, but I think women will eventually return to the family. As a woman, I can't leave my family and children alone for work. If, in the end, there is no way to reconcile the conflicts between work and family, I will give up my present job. For example, after my children studying in primary school in the future, I will apply for a job back in the city, so that I can take and pick them between school and home. At that time, I'm very likely to give up my present job. (T7)

Appendix 8: The commodity prices here are particularly high, and the price of vegetable is two or three times that of my hometown. When I was recruited here to be a teacher, the recruiter said that my monthly income was 4000 to 5000 yuan. But in fact, my monthly salary is only 2000 to 3000 yuan. The prices of the houses near the school are very high, so it is very difficult to buy a house here. The price of food is too high now. I spend 100 yuan every time I go shopping. It's even more expensive for our families with children. So far, I have almost no savings. (T5)

Appendix 9: The environment is really inferior to that of the mainland, and the sun is too sunburned. I got sunburn last summer, so I always ask myself why I came here so far from my parents? (T7)

Appendix 10: Although I have stayed here for many years, I still have the idea of going back to Nanjing City. There are no relatives and friends here, usually I can only chat with colleagues. I almost have no contact with people around. The local residents feel that we were from outside, and I do not make any friend. (T4)

Appendix 11: I haven't thought about to get married and settle here. But if I get married here, I would stay here forever. The thought of staying here for a lifetime is still a little bit uncomfortable. After all, it is not a long-term plan. I think I can't stay here for decades. I only treat my experience here as a transitional period, at least I can stay here to support myself, so I still have a job. Anyway, I can go back and try to become a civil servant or other career. Anyway, I want to go back. (T2)