

The Maintenance Mechanism of Teaching Willingness: A Grounded Theory Study of Student Teachers in Chinese Private Colleges

Jiao Zeng

South China Business College of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, 510545, China

Abstract: Based on grounded theory methodology, this study investigates the mechanisms underlying the maintenance of teaching willingness among student teachers in Chinese private colleges through interviews with 30 participants. The findings reveal that the participants' willingness to pursue a teaching career is significantly influenced by a social support system encompassing emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. A high level of such support contributes to stabilizing their initial commitment to teaching, whereas insufficient support is prone to triggering fluctuations in their intention or even leading to career diversion. Throughout this process, psychological resilience emerges as a crucial moderating factor, enabling individuals to cope with challenges, reframe difficulties, and thereby consolidate or even strengthen their teaching beliefs. Accordingly, it is recommended that private colleges establish a "practice-reflection" cycle to enhance student teachers' professional competencies, improve information support systems to facilitate rational career planning, and integrate psychological resilience training into the educational curriculum. These measures are proposed to bolster their professional adaptability and foster long-term resilience in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Student Teachers, Teaching Willingness, Grounded Theory, Private Colleges in China.

1. Introduction

Teachers are the foundational force in advancing educational modernization, with student teachers representing a vital reserve for the future teaching workforce. China's teacher education system is characterized by a diverse institutional structure. More than 3,000 schools participated in teacher training, but over 2,000 of them were secondary vocational schools, normal schools, higher vocational colleges, and higher normal colleges[1]. Overall, there remains a considerable gap in establishing a high-quality teacher education system. In response, the national policy has set the goal of building "a teacher education system with Chinese characteristics, with normal universities as the main body and with participation from high-level non-normal universities." [2] At present, China has 225 normal universities and 565 other higher education institutions offering teacher education programs. [3] While normal universities remain the core of teacher preparation, the participation of non-normal institutions remains essential. Among these, private colleges have emerged as active contributors. However, they have a relatively short history in offering teacher education programs and lack sufficient experience. Notably, since 2019, no private college has appeared in the annual *List of Teacher Education Programs Accredited at Regular Higher Education Institutions* published by the General Office of the Ministry of Education.

The teaching willingness of student teachers in private colleges significantly impacts individuals, training institutions, and the national education system. For individuals and families, abandoning the teaching profession after entering a teacher education program leads to a substantial waste of time, energy, and financial resources. For institutions, widespread low teaching willingness weakens students' engagement in learning, thereby lowering the quality and efficiency of talent cultivation. Nationally, it

directly affects the supply and retention of new teachers, ultimately hindering the development of basic education. Therefore, investigating this issue is crucial for building a high-quality teacher education system and improving future teacher training.

Particularly after the adjustment from the "Tuition-Free Teacher Education Policy" to the "Government-Funded Teacher Education Policy" in 2018, research on government-funded student teachers has revealed that their teaching willingness remains relatively stable, influenced more by family factors [4] and restrictive policy terms. [5] At the same time, studies have also emphasized the teaching willingness of non-government-funded student teachers, who constitute the majority of teacher candidates. Findings suggest that their teaching willingness is more strongly affected by the nature of the teaching profession as well as the quality of their training. [6] Against the backdrop of the "Rural Revitalization Plan," the willingness of student teachers to teach in rural areas has also become a new focus of inquiry. [7]

Research on student teachers' teaching willingness has been predominantly empirical, with quantitative studies being most common, though qualitative inquiry is gradually increasing. Existing work has focused mainly on three areas: first, identifying influencing factors such as professional value, individual traits, and institutional contexts; second, examining the direct effects of specific factors like program quality; and third, analyzing interactive mechanisms between teaching willingness, professional identity, and practical experiences such as teaching practicums. Despite providing a valuable foundation, existing research leaves important gaps. First, student teachers in private colleges have rarely been studied as a distinct group. These institutions started later and from a weaker baseline than public counterparts, raising the question of how their reported "teacher education fervor" translates into actual commitment to teaching. Consequently, the applicability of prior findings to the private college

context remains unclear.

Second, there is scarce research on what kinds of social support student teachers need after choosing a teacher education program in order to sustain their initial commitment to teaching. In light of these gaps, this study employs a qualitative approach to investigate student teachers in private colleges, aiming to uncover the social support factors that enable them to maintain their teaching willingness and to elucidate how these factors function. The findings are expected to provide insights for teacher training in private colleges and to offer practical reference for supporting student teachers' ongoing commitment to the teaching profession.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Method

Grounded theory is an approach within qualitative research rather than a specific theory. It was first proposed by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser in 1967 and later further developed. The two scholars innovatively introduced a grounded theory research method that builds theory through concept extraction based on the process of data collection, organization, and analysis in qualitative research. This approach emphasizes constructing theory that is "grounded" in textual data.

In this study, the researcher systematically collected first-hand data, aiming to understand how the participants describe the changes in their teaching willingness and how they explain the reasons behind such changes. Through this process, the researcher sought to identify as many conceptual categories as possible that reflect the essence of the phenomenon. Theoretical construction was then achieved by exploring the relationships between these conceptual categories. This method, which emphasizes the logic of discovery rather than verification, is well-suited for the exploratory nature of this study, which investigates the factors influencing changes in student teachers' teaching willingness.

Following the grounded theory approach, this study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants. The interview instrument was a self-developed "Interview Outline on Factors Influencing Changes in Teaching Willingness Among Student Teachers in Private Colleges."

2.2. Data Collection

From November 2024 to February 2025, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with 30 senior-year student teachers from three private undergraduate universities (referred to as X, Y, and Z) in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to obtain first-hand data for grounded theory analysis. These three institutions have each been established for less than 40 years, and their teacher education programs were all launched within the past 10 years.

The data collection process proceeded as follows: First, through reviewing and analyzing literature related to teaching willingness and social support theory, the research question was defined, an interview outline was drafted, and its validity was tested. Subsequently, purposive random sampling was employed to select 30 senior-year students majoring in three teacher education programs: Preschool Education, Primary Education, and English Education. The specific sample distribution is presented in Table 1. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and primarily covered the following topics: motivation for choosing the teacher education program, changes in teaching willingness from the first to the fourth year of study, supportive factors that helped sustain their commitment to teaching, and coping strategies when facing setbacks or adverse circumstances.

3. Data Analysis

Following each formal interview, the researcher organized the interview data within 24 hours, ultimately accumulating a textual record of over 100,000 words (Chinese). The interview content was transcribed, and irrelevant material was removed. The data were then organized, analyzed, and coded with the assistance of Nvivo 11.0 software.

3.1. Open Coding

Open coding involves breaking down the obtained raw data and, through constant comparison, identifying similarities and differences within the material to label the phenomena reflected in the data, thereby gradually conceptualizing them. During open coding, the researcher must strive to "bracket" personal biases and preconceived notions about the study, aiming to discover and extract as many concepts as possible from the data. The process is carried out as meticulously as possible until coding reaches saturation.[8]

In this study, through line-by-line reading of the data, conceptual labeling, and code integration, a total of 63 initial concepts were ultimately extracted, such as consensus through negotiation, national emphasis, harmonious interaction, selfless dedication, high pressure, geographical preference, and social media influence. These initial concepts were further synthesized into 17 initial categories: family expectations, social recognition, student feedback, role model influence, experiences of others, employment information, online image shaping, training program, professional skills, family capital, theoretical knowledge, competition experience, professional certificates, social practice, course performance, positive coping, and negative coping. As shown in Table 1, these 17 categories represent the factors influencing fluctuations or reversals in student teachers' teaching willingness during their studies, although the relative impact of each factor varies across different stages.

Table 1. Results of Open Coding(Selected Examples)

No.	Subcategory	Initial Concepts
1	Family Expectations	Program preference ranking, Consensus through negotiation, Future aspirations
2	Social Recognition	High social status, Job stability, Above-average income, Paid vacations, National emphasis, Tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education
3	Student Feedback	Being anticipated, Being needed, Being liked, Harmonious interaction
.....		
16	Positive Coping	Rationalization, Seeking external help, Motivating oneself
17	Negative Coping	Distortion, Avoidance and withdrawal, Self-denial

3.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding is a process of further deepening the numerous categories formed during open coding, aiming to develop categories with stronger generalizability or a higher level of abstraction. Its main task is to discover and construct various relationships between categories, including causal,

temporal, sequential, contextual, and similarity relationships,[9]thereby organically linking the subcategories obtained from open coding. Based on the 17 subcategories, five main categories were summarized and refined: emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, appraisal support, and coping strategies, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Axial Coding(Selected Examples)

Main Category	Subcategory	Interpretation
Emotional Support	Family Expectations	Family members' views and attitudes toward student teachers pursuing a teaching career
	Social Recognition	
	Student Feedback	
	Role Model Influence	
Informational Support	Career Concretization	
	Employment Information	Job-related information obtained through various channels
	Training Program	Student teachers' understanding of the talent cultivation plan, including how they will be trained and the expected learning outcomes
	Online Image Shaping	The portrayal of teacher image in cyberspace
Instrumental Support	Professional Skills	Foundational, instructional, and educational management skills that student teachers should master
	Theoretical Knowledge	General knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and subject-specific knowledge that student teachers should acquire
	Family Capital	Family economic conditions and social networks of student teachers
Appraisal Support	Competition Awards	
	Professional Certificates	
	Teaching Practice	
	Course Performance	Academic results and process evaluations from various courses taken during studies
Psychological Resilience	Positive Coping	
	Negative Coping	When facing difficulties or setbacks, student teachers tend to avoid problems, dare not confront them, or blame themselves for being unsuitable for teaching

3.3. Selective Coding

Selective coding refers to the process of systematically analyzing all identified conceptual categories to select one "core category," then focusing the analysis on those codes related to this core category. Through repeated review, comparison, and analysis of the raw materials, open coding

results, axial coding outcomes, and analytical memos, this study identified "teaching willingness" as the core category. Using the relational structure of the main categories as a "storyline," a model of "Factors Influencing Student Teachers' Teaching Willingness and Their Mechanisms of Action" was constructed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

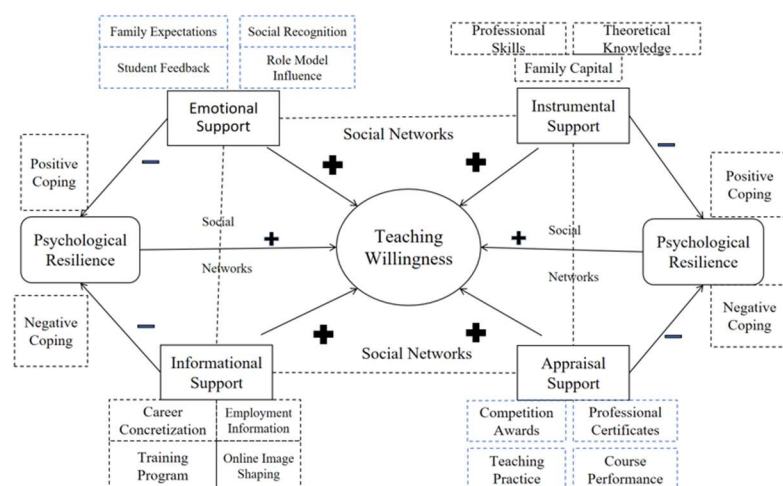


Figure 1. Mechanism Model of Sustaining Teaching Willingness Among Student Teachers

4. Findings and Interpretation

Through grounded theory analysis of in-depth interview data from 30 student teachers in private colleges, this study constructed a mechanism model with "teaching willingness" as the core category, encompassing five main categories: emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, appraisal support, and psychological resilience. The findings reveal that the teaching willingness of student teachers in private colleges is not static but exhibits dynamic evolution throughout their four-year university experience. Its trajectory is profoundly shaped by the combined influence of multi-level social support and individual psychological resilience.

4.1. The Multidimensional Composition of Social Support and its Differential Impact on Teaching Willingness

The process of student teachers sustaining their teaching willingness is essentially one of continuously acquiring and integrating various social support resources. These resources can be categorized into four dimensions, the level of which directly relates to the stability of teaching willingness.

First, emotional support acts as a "stabilizer" for teaching willingness. This support stems from family expectations, a societal atmosphere that respects teachers, positive feedback from students, and the exemplary influence of teacher role models. The study finds that sustained family understanding and encouragement serve as crucial backing for student teachers navigating crises of confidence. For instance, when facing pressure regarding employment location choices, family tolerance and support can effectively alleviate anxiety and reshape career expectations. Simultaneously, the affection received from students during teaching practice and the inspiration drawn from exemplary teachers provide a strong sense of professional value and role identification, becoming an intrinsic emotional driver for their commitment to teaching.

Second, informational support serves as a "navigator" for professional cognition. This refers to information concerning the actual conditions of the teaching profession, job market dynamics, talent development pathways, and the shaping of professional images online. Student teachers in private colleges operate within a complex information environment where the timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of information access are critical. The research indicates that high-level informational support helps student teachers break through "information cocoons," correct cognitive biases caused by one-sided or negative information, thereby enabling rational career planning and stabilizing teaching willingness. Conversely, information scarcity or distortion can lead to unwarranted pessimism or poor decision-making, triggering fluctuations in willingness.

Third, instrumental support functions as "ballast" for professional competence. This primarily includes the professional theoretical knowledge and teaching skills acquired through coursework, as well as the economic capital and social resources provided by families. Solid subject knowledge, lesson design, and classroom management skills form the foundation of student teachers' confidence to stand before a class. In the interviews, expressions of confidence were often linked to statements like "the curriculum was

comprehensive" or "I learned how to design lessons." Conversely, experiences of inadequacy directly triggered self-doubt and wavering willingness. Furthermore, while family financial support and social connections do not directly enhance competence, they offer more trial opportunities and psychological security, indirectly supporting continued exploration.

Fourth, appraisal support serves as a "validation ground" for self-efficacy. This support originates from external signals recognizing student teachers' professional abilities, including competition awards, obtained qualification certificates, teaching practice performance, and academic grades. These "verifiable achievements" are key references for student teachers' self-assessment of competence. Those who achieved excellent results in competitions or practice, received positive student feedback, or earned praise from supervising teachers demonstrated stronger professional confidence and teaching aspirations. For example, winning a micro-lesson competition or receiving positive feedback during teaching practice significantly reinforced the belief that "I can be a good teacher." Appraisal support translates internal capability into external evidence, playing a vital role in consolidating teaching willingness.

4.2. Psychological Resilience: A Key Moderating Variable in Coping with Fluctuations in Support and Adversity

In reality, the social support received by student teachers during their university years is often fluctuating and imbalanced, rarely maintained at a consistently high level. They frequently encounter insufficient support in certain dimensions or even face negative shocks, such as setbacks in teaching practice or the negative portrayal of the teaching profession in online spaces. During these critical junctures, an individual's psychological resilience—the capacity to adapt and recover in the face of stress and adversity—emerges as the core mechanism moderating the trajectory of teaching willingness.

Student teachers who adopt positive coping strategies proactively seek guidance from mentors, expand their information channels, or intensify skill practice. They transform situations of insufficient support into opportunities for self-reflection and growth. Consequently, after overcoming difficulties, they often demonstrate a more steadfast commitment to teaching and even enhanced professional identity. Conversely, those accustomed to negative coping tend to resort to avoidance or self-denial when confronted with challenges, uncritically accepting negative information, which gradually erodes their professional confidence and may ultimately lead to the attenuation or abandonment of their teaching willingness.

Thus, the strength of psychological resilience essentially determines whether a student teacher, facing an imperfect support system or adversity, will move toward "becoming stronger through setbacks" or "withdrawing in the face of difficulty." It functions like an internal "psychological immune system," not only helping the individual buffer the impact of external negative information but also enabling them to continuously engage in meaning-making and emotional regulation amidst fluctuation and uncertainty. This process effectively sustains or reactivates a deep-seated belief in and commitment to the teaching profession.

In summary, the sustenance of teaching willingness among student teachers in private colleges is a dynamic and

dialectical process. Upon enrollment, students typically possess an initial inclination toward teaching. This inclination is continuously subjected to "input" and "testing" from the four-dimensional social support system—emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal—throughout their four-year journey. High-level, balanced social support can directly nourish and strengthen teaching willingness. When support is low or negative, teaching willingness fluctuates. At this point, psychological resilience plays a crucial moderating role. Individuals with high psychological resilience can activate positive coping mechanisms, proactively compensate for support deficits, reverse downward trends in willingness, and even achieve "growth through adversity." Conversely, those with low psychological resilience may experience a continuous decline in willingness due to negative coping, ultimately deviating from the teaching path. It is precisely through this ongoing interaction between social support and individual psychological resilience that student teachers in private colleges ultimately shape and finalize their commitment to the teaching profession.

5. Pathways for Enhancing the Cultivation of Student Teachers in Private Colleges

5.1. Strengthening Professional Competence to Enhance Core Competitiveness

Student teachers' teaching willingness is intrinsically tied to their professional competence. The "Willingness-Competence Matrix" categorizes them into four types: the ideal "high willingness–high competence" individuals who are most likely to sustain a teaching career; the "low willingness–low competence" group most prone to leaving the profession; and two unstable intermediate types that require targeted support—either to bolster competence or to stimulate willingness.

National standards have consistently outlined the core dimensions of teacher professional competence: ethical practice, teaching practice, comprehensive educational competence, and self-directed development. While ethical awareness and initial commitment often exist prior to training and require continuous nurturing, key professional capacities—particularly in teaching practice—are largely cultivated during university studies. Interview data reveal that perceived shortcomings in instructional design and classroom teaching (e.g., "not knowing how to teach," "being unable to manage the classroom") directly trigger fluctuations in teaching willingness. Such practical feedback creates a critical cycle of reflection, improvement, and retesting, which is essential for building confidence and employability.

Although competencies like subject mastery and classroom teaching are the most visible in practice, a teacher's professional profile is assessed more holistically during certification and recruitment—encompassing knowledge, educational commitment, career planning, and communication skills. Therefore, solidifying a broad range of professional competencies is fundamental to enhancing student teachers' core competitiveness. This enables them to adhere to their initial commitment, recover more quickly from periods of doubt, and ultimately progress toward becoming the resilient "high willingness–high competence" graduates that the education system needs.

5.2. Establishing Diverse Practical Platforms for Dual-Driven Capacity Building and Knowledge Production

The integration of pedagogical and academic dimensions is essential in teacher preparation, as is the fusion of theoretical and practical knowledge. Student teachers' professional competence is developed not only through theoretical learning but also crucially through engagement in teaching practice. In practice, theoretical knowledge is applied and tested, while new practical knowledge is generated through dialogic interaction within specific socio-temporal contexts.

Student teachers navigate distinct spaces: the relatively homogeneous theoretical space of the university campus and the complex practical space of authentic teaching. The latter requires them to translate theory into practice through observation, imitation, and reflection, thereby transforming experience into professional competence. Interview data confirm that pivotal changes in teaching willingness are frequently tied to practical experiences, underscoring practice as a critical catalyst for the spiral development of both commitment and capability.

Therefore, it is imperative for student teachers to actively seek practical engagement, using it to assess and improve their abilities. Concurrently, higher education institutions must build diversified practical platforms, ensure high-quality teaching practicum (observation, internship, and practice), and provide robust emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support throughout this process.

5.3. Facilitating Information Channels to Break Down Information Barriers

In an era of highly developed information, everyone strives to obtain more and more accurate information to stand out in intense competition. However, due to various factors, disparities exist in individuals' ability to access, process, and utilize information—this is the information gap. This gap carries significant weight: some miss opportunities due to insufficient information, while others seize them based on informational advantage.

In the interviews, student teachers consistently acknowledged the intense competition within teacher education, the difficulty of securing a established post, and the challenges of staying in major cities. However, facing the same employment environment, their approaches to analyzing and utilizing information differed. Information regarding teacher recruitment, skill requirements, and industry trends is often mastered by those with extensive networks, keen insight, or strong information-searching abilities. Those who are less engaged or prefer not to communicate often limit themselves to fragmented information or individual contacts, seeing only a partial picture or passively waiting.

This disadvantage caused by the information gap severely impacts the confidence and professional identity of some student teachers, leading to a weakening in their teaching willingness. Therefore, in addition to employment guidance or career planning courses, other courses should also introduce student teachers to relevant national policies and detailed recruitment information, such as the "Western Region Program", the "Special Post Teacher Plan", as well as terms like "established post", "contract-based teacher", "temporary teacher", and "rural teacher". Publicizing these policies and comparing related information helps student

teachers gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of employer needs and job nature, enabling them to make informed choices based on rational weighing. This can prevent some from being unduly alarmed by hearsay, giving up impulsively, developing a sense of job mismatch, or blindly following trends by flocking to popular cities or regions.

This information gap exists not only among student teachers but also among higher education institutions. Therefore, institutions should strengthen connections with primary and secondary schools and kindergartens to better understand employer needs, revise talent cultivation plans for teacher education programs, and promote the formation of a linked feedback mechanism encompassing "student recruitment-cultivation-employment". This involves continuously updating course content and educational concepts to enhance the quality of talent cultivation, improve the employability of student teachers, and strengthen their teaching willingness.

6. Conclusion

This grounded theory study reveals that sustaining teaching willingness among student teachers in Chinese private colleges is a dynamic process shaped by a multi-dimensional social support system and moderated by individual psychological resilience. The four-dimensional support system-encompassing emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support-serves as an essential external resource network. When adequate, it stabilizes and strengthens teaching willingness; when deficient, willingness becomes prone to fluctuation. In such contexts, psychological resilience acts as a key internal regulator, influencing whether individuals persist or disengage when facing challenges.

Theoretically, this research advances the field by integrating external supports and internal resilience into a coherent model, moving beyond factor-listing to elucidate interaction mechanisms within the under-researched context of private higher education. Practically, it highlights the need for teacher education programs to deliberately build a holistic support ecosystem and cultivate psychological resilience alongside professional training.

Future studies could further validate and refine this model through large-scale surveys, longitudinal designs, or cross-regional comparisons.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by Project of Guangdong Provincial Educational Science Planning: Research on the Practice Teaching System for Teacher Education Programs in Private Colleges under the Context of Professional Accreditation (No. 2023GXJK558).

References

- [1] Zhu, X. D. (2018, September 27). Constructing a teacher education system suited to the new era. *Guangming Daily*, p. 14.
- [2] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council. (2018, January 31). Opinions on comprehensively deepening the reform of the construction of the teaching workforce in the new era [EB/OL]. Retrieved June 17, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_zt/moe_357/jyzt_2018_n/2018_zt15/zt1815_yw/201801/t20180131_326148.html
- [3] Lin, C. D. (2023). Constructing a high-quality teacher education system with Chinese characteristics. *Educational Research*, (10), 108-114.
- [4] Feng, W. Z., & Wu, J. T. (2011). Between personal will and public will: A survey on the graduation intentions of tuition-free student teachers. *Teacher Education Research*, 23(3), 56–60. <https://doi.org/10.13445/j.cnki.t.e.r.2011.03.014>
- [5] Jiang, Y. Q., & Yang, Y. (2013). A survey on the teaching willingness of bilingual teachers in Xinjiang: A case study of the primary education program at a normal university in Xinjiang. *Xinjiang Social Sciences*, (3), 160–164.
- [6] Li, Q., Zhao, J. S., & Liu, W. (2022). Professional identity and career choice of government-funded preschool student teachers from the perspective of field theory. *Education Science*, 38(4), 67–74.
- [7] Pang, C. M., & Tang, Z. M. (2023). The influence of public service motivation on student teachers' willingness to teach in rural areas. *Higher Education Exploration*, (4), 46–52.
- [8] Chen, X. M. (2000). *Qualitative research methods and social science research*. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House. p. 332.
- [9] Chen, X. M. (2000). *Qualitative research methods and social science research*. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House. p. 333.