

Teachers' persistence in resource-constrained and conflict-affected communities in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates why teachers persist in the Philippines' resource-constrained, conflict-affected "last-mile" schools, reframing retention beyond deficit narratives of burnout and attrition. Using a descriptive phenomenological design guided by Colaizzi, we conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews with 15 public-school teachers in geographically isolated municipalities of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur between September and November 2024, supplemented by brief reflective journals and supported by member checking and an audit trail to secure trustworthiness. Analysis reveals persistence as a moral-relational practice braided from duty to students' futures, faith-inflected vocation, thick bonds of belonging with colleagues and communities, and a professional identity sustained by visible learner impact and craft growth, continually negotiated against material scarcity, bureaucratic load, and ambient insecurity through pragmatic coping and family responsibility. These findings challenge rational-choice explanations by showing that staying endures less through marginal incentives than through reinforced meaning infrastructures and everyday dignifying leadership. The study contributes a humanistic account of professional endurance in fragile settings and suggests policy directions that prioritize localized psychosocial support, recognition, and paperwork rationalization to strengthen the ecologies that already hold teachers in place.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global education agenda, epitomized by sustainable development goal 4, posits inclusive and equitable quality education as a universal right and a cornerstone of societal progress [1]. Yet, for millions of children residing in areas marred by armed conflict, endemic poverty, and systemic resource deprivation, this promise remains elusive [2]. In such contexts, schools often represent the last bastions of stability and hope, and the teachers who staff them are frontline agents of social cohesion and human capital development. However, these same educators operate under conditions of extreme professional and personal duress,

navigating environments characterized by infrastructural decay, pedagogical resource scarcity, and the psychological burdens of community trauma and pervasive insecurity [3].

In the Philippines, a nation of stark socioeconomic contrasts, this reality is acutely concentrated in specific regions, notably in parts of Mindanao and other isolated rural communities. These areas, frequently caught in the nexus of decades-long insurgencies, inter-communal tensions, and severe economic marginalization, represent a critical challenge to the nation's educational objectives [4]. The prevailing academic and policy discourse on education in such "last-mile" schools is overwhelmingly dominated by a narrative of crisis [5]. Research has extensively documented high rates of teacher burnout, attrition, and the debilitating effects of violence and poverty on student learning outcomes. This problem-focused paradigm, while essential for identifying systemic failures, inadvertently obscures a crucial counter-narrative: the phenomenon of teacher persistence [6].

Despite conditions that would precipitate resignation in more stable settings, a significant cohort of educators elects to remain in these challenging posts for years, even decades. This persistence presents a critical paradox. It defies rational-choice models of career progression and stands in stark contrast to the dominant deficit-based narratives. Why do they stay when every institutional and environmental indicator suggests they should leave? What is the nature and structure of the lived experience of teaching in a community where basic resources are a daily struggle and the threat of conflict is a constant reality?

The failure to systematically investigate this phenomenon constitutes a significant lacuna in the literature on teacher education, educational psychology, and education in emergencies. Existing studies on teacher motivation often rely on frameworks developed in stable, well-resourced Western contexts, rendering them inadequate for explaining the complex, situated decisions of educators in the Global South's most fragile spaces. Consequently, policy interventions aimed at improving teacher retention in these areas—often limited to modest hazard pay or generalized training—are designed without a nuanced understanding of the very individuals they seek to support [7], [8]. This study addresses this critical gap. It eschews a purely problem-focused approach to instead explore the essence of professional endurance from the perspective of those who live it. Using a phenomenological methodology, this research seeks to illuminate the fundamental structures of meaning that sustain teachers in the Philippines' most demanding educational frontiers, thereby providing a deeper, more humanistic foundation for policies that can truly support teaching where it hurts the most.

2. METHOD

2.1. Design

This study utilized a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of teachers persisting in resource-constrained and conflict-affected communities. Guided by the procedural framework of Colaizzi [9], the design is oriented toward a rigorous description of the essence of a phenomenon as consciously experienced by individuals. This approach was deemed optimal for addressing the central research questions, which seek to understand how teachers constitute meaning around persistence, duty, risk, and hope in their professional lives. Using the participants' first-person narratives, descriptive phenomenology facilitates an intimate understanding of the subjective structures of their professional world, moving beyond pre-existing theoretical constructs to capture the phenomenon in its own terms.

2.2. Participants

The study involved 15 public-school teachers from geographically isolated and conflict-sensitive municipalities in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, Mindanao. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The primary inclusion criterion was a minimum of two years of continuous teaching service in their current post, ensuring sufficient immersion in the context to provide rich, reflective accounts. To ensure a heterogeneous sample that captured a wide spectrum of experiences, maximum variation sampling was employed based on years of service (ranging from 2 to 15 years), school level (elementary and secondary), and specific community context. Initial contact was made with key informants from local school district supervisors, who identified potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria. Subsequent participants were recruited through referrals from the initial cohort. Theoretical saturation, determined by the point at which new interviews ceased to generate novel themes or insights, was reached with the 15th participant, confirming the adequacy of the sample size.

2.3. Data collection

Primary data were generated between September and November 2024 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform. This modality was chosen for its capacity to reach participants across a wide and logistically challenging geographical area. All interviews

were conducted in English, with participants providing informed consent prior to engagement. Each interview, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, was guided by an aide-mémoire and initiated with a grand tour question: "Please describe your lived experience of being a teacher in this community, focusing on what it has been like for you to continue in your role over the years." This opening prompted a narrative response, which was then explored through follow-up questions probing the meaning of persistence, the navigation of duty and risk, sources of hope, and perceived structures of support. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. To supplement the interview data and capture reflections closer to the moment of experience, participants were invited to contribute brief, unstructured reflective journals or voice notes.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded, according to the seven steps of Colaizzi [9] method for descriptive phenomenological inquiry. First, all interview transcripts and supplementary materials were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization and a holistic sense of each participant's account. Second, significant statements and phrases directly pertinent to the phenomenon of persistence were extracted from the transcripts. Third, formulated meanings were derived from each significant statement, articulating the researcher's interpretation of its core content. Fourth, these formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes that were common across participants' narratives. Fifth, the emergent themes were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under investigation. Sixth, this exhaustive description was refined to articulate the fundamental structure, or essence, of the experience. Finally, as a critical step for validation, the essential structure was presented to a subset of participants (member checking) to ascertain whether the description resonated with their lived experience.

2.5. Trustworthiness of the study

The rigor of this study was established through adherence to Lincoln and Guba [10] criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, persistent observation during interviews, and member checking, wherein participants validated the accuracy of transcripts and the final thematic description. Dependability and confirmability were addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail, which included raw data, data reduction and analysis products, and reflexive memos documenting the researcher's methodological decisions and epistemological assumptions throughout the process. Furthermore, peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research provided an external check on the interpretive process. Finally, transferability was supported by providing a thick, rich description of the participants, the research context, and the findings, allowing readers to make informed judgments about the applicability of the results to other similar contexts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

A total of 15 participants, aged 26 to 50 years, participated in the study. The group comprised 8 female and 7 male teachers, all holding at least a bachelor's degree in education. Their years of continuous service in resource-constrained and conflict-affected communities ranged from 2 to 15 years.

3.1.1. Theme 1: moral purpose anchoring persistence

Teachers emphasized that persistence was rooted in a moral sense of duty. Staying was described as both a calling and a responsibility beyond personal gain.

a. Duty as service

Teachers considered teaching a sacred obligation that must be carried out despite difficulties. For many, leaving would mean betraying their mission.

P3: "...teaching here feels like a duty, not just a job ... if I leave, I feel I would be abandoning my purpose."

P9: "...it's service more than salary ... this is what I'm called to do."

Teachers emphasized that persistence became proof of commitment, as duty outweighed convenience. The act of staying was a declaration of loyalty to their profession and students.

P7: "...even when it's hard, I remind myself I'm here for my students ... that keeps me steady."

P12: "...commitment means enduring ... I stay because I believe it's the right thing to do."

b. Students' futures as motivation

Participants expressed that their persistence was deeply anchored in the promise of their students' success. The progress of learners made their sacrifices meaningful.

P1: *"...when I see my students graduate, that's when I know staying is worth it."*

P11: *"...the future of these children is in our hands, and that keeps me here."*

Teachers highlighted that student achievement provided purpose that outlasted temporary challenges. They saw persistence as an investment in the lives of their learners.

P5: *"...my students' victories are my victories ... that's what keeps me staying."*

P14: *"...even if I struggle, I know my students gain ... that gives me strength to persist."*

3.1.2. Theme 2: risk calculus of leaving and staying

Teachers described staying as a constant negotiation of risks. They weighed opportunities elsewhere against the uncertainties of leaving.

a. Risk embodied in stress

Participants reported that their bodies carried the burden of uncertainty. Anxiety, fatigue, and sleeplessness often emerged when thinking about leaving.

P5: *"...every time I think of resigning, I can't sleep ... it feels heavy in my chest."*

P12: *"...my body reacts — I feel tired and anxious when the thought of leaving crosses my mind."*

Teachers recognized that the decision to persist was not only mental but also physical, as stress manifested in tangible ways. They described living with unease as part of persistence.

P2: *"...staying makes me restless, but leaving feels worse ... my body reminds me of that every day."*

P8: *"...I feel it in my health, yet I choose to endure."*

b. Choosing persistence despite uncertainty

Despite available options, many teachers chose to stay because of their commitments and relationships. They acknowledged the risks but still prioritized meaning.

P6: *"...I had offers already, but I stayed ... it's uncertain, but my heart tells me to continue."*

P10: *"...even if the risks are big, I still choose to remain ... there's meaning here."*

For these teachers, persistence meant accepting instability as part of their professional journey. They described staying as a conscious act of courage.

P4: *"...the choice to persist is the bravest decision I keep repeating."*

P13: *"...I live with risk every day ... but staying makes me stronger."*

3.1.3. Theme 3: community belonging as a source of strength

A strong sense of belonging within the school community sustained teachers' persistence. Colleagues and students formed a network of support.

a. School as family

Teachers often referred to their schools as families that provided emotional grounding. This familial atmosphere made leaving unthinkable.

P6: *"...this school is like my family ... it's hard to walk away from people who treat you as one of their own."*

P13: *"...the community here embraces me ... that's why I stay despite hardships."*

Teachers highlighted that belonging reduced isolation and reminded them they were part of a collective mission. Community ties strengthened their resolve.

P1: *"...our bond makes the difficulties bearable."*

P9: *"...when you belong, you don't feel alone in the struggle."*

b. Mutual support among peers

Colleagues were described as companions in endurance, sharing burdens and encouraging one another during difficulties.

P7: *"...when I feel like giving up, my co-teachers remind me that we're in this together."*

P15: *"...we lean on each other ... that makes persistence possible."*

Support from peers created a culture of encouragement that prevented burnout. Teachers framed persistence as a shared practice rather than an individual struggle.

P2: *"...without my peers, I don't think I would last this long."*

P11: *"...we survive because we carry each other."*

c. Students as anchors

Teachers considered their relationships with students as vital. Learners' appreciation and respect reinforced the feeling of belonging.

P4: *"...my students call me their second parent ... that kind of bond keeps me here."*

P10: *"...the smiles and gratitude of my students make the struggle lighter."*

Community belonging was not only about colleagues but also about shared identity with students and families.

P2: *"...I stay because I feel rooted here ... the community accepts me."*

P12: *"...the joy of my students keeps me in place."*

3.1.4. Theme 4: faith and meaning-making in persistence

Teachers relied heavily on faith and spirituality to endure hardships. For many, persistence was inseparable from belief and meaning.

a. Spiritual reliance

Prayer and religious practices were cited as essential in moments of exhaustion. Teachers turned to faith as their first source of strength.

P4: *"...every time I want to quit, I pray ... and somehow I find strength to go on."*

P10: *"...my faith tells me this is where I should be ... it gives me peace to continue."*

Faith was not only a coping tool but also a reassurance that they were on the right path. Belief guided them through uncertainty.

P9: *"...my prayers remind me why I stay."*

P14: *"...faith calms me ... it keeps me steady in storms."*

b. Persistence as vocation

Participants framed their persistence as a divine calling or vocation. Teaching was not only work but destiny.

P2: *"...I see this work as a calling from God ... leaving would mean turning away from that."*

P14: *"...there's meaning in staying because it's not just work, it's vocation."*

Teachers connected persistence to divine purpose, making it sacred rather than optional. They viewed endurance as obedience to higher will.

P5: *"...I stay because I believe God wants me here."*

P7: *"...this is not coincidence, it's calling."*

3.1.5. Theme 5: professional identity and fulfillment

Teachers connected persistence to their sense of professional identity. Remaining in the role strengthened their pride and fulfillment as educators.

a. Pride in being a teacher

Teaching was described as a defining part of self. For many, leaving would mean losing a piece of their identity.

P1: *"...teaching defines me ... leaving would mean losing part of who I am."*

P7: *"...I feel proud saying I am a teacher here ... that identity keeps me strong."*

Teachers linked their self-worth with their role as educators, making persistence part of who they were.

P3: *"...teaching is my identity, not just my work."*

P6: *"...if I quit, I lose myself."*

b. Fulfillment through impact

Teachers highlighted that fulfillment came from seeing the fruits of their efforts in students' lives.

P9: *"...when I see my students succeed, I know this is where I belong."*

P11: *"...my identity and fulfillment come together when I stay in this role."*

Fulfillment acted as a reward that balanced out difficulties. Teachers felt that every hardship was validated by student growth.

P2: *"...my students' achievements heal my exhaustion."*

P15: *"...the impact I see makes me want to continue."*

c. Growth as professionals

Persistence was also linked to professional development. Teachers considered staying as an opportunity to sharpen skills.

P5: *"...every year I stay, I grow as an educator."*

P12: *"...I see persistence as part of building myself professionally."*

Growth gave teachers confidence that endurance would lead to mastery. They framed persistence as an ongoing path to excellence.

P8: *"...I become a better teacher because I endure."*

P10: *"...I learn and improve each year ... staying shapes me."*

3.1.6. Theme 6: institutional supports and constraints

Institutional actions significantly influenced teachers' persistence. While some supports encouraged staying, constraints tested their endurance.

a. Supportive leadership

Encouragement from administrators provided affirmation and motivation. Recognition was valued even more than material rewards.

P8: *"...our principal always checks on us ... it makes me feel valued."*

P13: *"...small incentives, even recognition, really help us continue."*

Leaders who affirmed teachers created an environment of respect and acknowledgment. This institutional care made persistence easier.

P2: *"...support matters more than salary sometimes."*

P4: *"...I stay because I feel seen by my leaders."*

b. Constraints and lack of resources

Teachers expressed frustration over inadequate resources, which added to the burden of persistence.

P5: *"...sometimes the lack of teaching materials discourages me ... it's a struggle to persist."*

P12: *"...policies are not always fair ... but I endure because of the students."*

The absence of resources made teachers feel undervalued, but they carried on for learners' sake. Persistence often meant compensating for institutional gaps.

P11: *"...we adjust because the students cannot suffer."*

P14: *"...I use my own money to cover what the school lacks."*

c. Policy pressures

Institutional requirements sometimes intensified stress. Participants felt policies often failed to account for real classroom struggles.

P6: *"...so many reports and requirements ... it drains us."*

P15: *"...too much paperwork makes it harder to focus on real teaching."*

Teachers described persistence as surviving policy demands that pulled them away from teaching. Endurance required navigating bureaucracy as much as pedagogy.

P7: *"...the system adds pressure, but I won't let it break me."*

P9: *"...I persist not because of policies, but despite them."*

3.1.7. Theme 7: family obligation and resilience practices

Family expectations and personal coping mechanisms strongly shaped persistence. Teachers stayed not only for themselves but also for loved ones.

a. Family responsibility

Teachers highlighted that family needs and expectations tied them to their roles.

P3: *"...I cannot just leave because my family depends on me financially."*

P14: *"...my parents expect me to stay in teaching ... it's part of honoring them."*

Family served as a constant reminder that persistence was not only personal but collective. Teachers endured for the sake of those who depended on them.

P2: *"...staying is my way of providing stability for my loved ones."*

P6: *"...I carry my family's hopes every day."*

b. Resilience practices

Coping strategies such as journaling, prayer, and peer conversations were vital in managing stress.

P10: *"...talking with fellow teachers is my therapy ... it makes me stronger to stay."*

P12: *"...I cope by journaling and reflecting ... it helps me release the stress."*

Resilience practices provided outlets for pain and renewal. Teachers found ways to transform stress into strength.

P1: *"...persistence hurts, but I manage through my routines."*

P8: *"...coping keeps me balanced and helps me stay."*

c. Balancing persistence and sacrifice

Participants acknowledged that staying sometimes meant personal sacrifice, but resilience helped them carry it.

P5: *"...I stay even if it hurts, because resilience is what this work demands."*

P11: *"...persistence is not easy, but I carry it because of family and faith."*

Teachers viewed sacrifice as inseparable from persistence. They described resilience as the bridge that allowed them to keep going.

P7: *"...I pay the price of staying, but my resilience sustains me."*

P9: *"...sacrifice is heavy, but it builds my strength to endure."*

3.2. Discussion

This study aimed to describe the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers who persist in their roles despite challenges. Through the thematic analysis of interview data, the study identified several key themes that illuminate the motivations, struggles, and supports that shape persistence in the teaching profession. The teachers in this study highlighted the centrality of moral purpose as a driving force in their persistence. Many participants described teaching as a calling and a duty to their students and communities. They emphasized that the progress and success of their learners outweighed personal and financial challenges. This finding aligns with Scott *et al.* [11] who noted that teachers often interpret persistence as an ethical responsibility rooted in service. Similarly, Tomasello [12] argued that moral obligation is a powerful anchor in contexts where external rewards are limited. In relation to established retention theories, these findings align with self-determination theory as proposed by Deci and Ryan [13], particularly regarding the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while extending beyond purely economic rational-choice explanations by emphasizing purpose as a durable intrinsic motivator [14]. They also correspond with job embeddedness theory articulated by Lee *et al.* [15], where teachers' social and professional links, perceived fit, and the sacrifices associated with leaving collectively reduce turnover intentions, even in contexts with modest extrinsic rewards.

Another theme emphasized the risk calculus of leaving and staying, with teachers describing how their bodies carried the weight of uncertainty. Stress, anxiety, and fatigue were often reported as physical manifestations of risk. Still, many chose to stay despite instability, framing persistence as an act of courage. These findings resonate with Konrad [16] who found that professional endurance often involves weighing risks against meaning. In a similar vein, Settembre-Blundo *et al.* [17] suggested that the decision to remain in teaching requires not only rational calculation but also embodied resilience. Compared with conservation of resources theory proposed by Hobfoll [18], participants' narratives emphasize the protection of "meaning" and professional identity as valuable resources, illustrating how perceived gains in significance can offset losses in energy or material security—a nuance often underrepresented in burnout-focused models.

The importance of community belonging also emerged strongly. Teachers framed their schools as families, with colleagues and students providing emotional grounding. Peer networks and relationships with learners were critical in sustaining their persistence. This finding supports the work of Arthur and Bradley [19] who reported that teachers' persistence is reinforced by collegial support and social bonds in school settings. Likewise, du Toit-Brits [20] argued that community recognition can substitute for material incentives by affirming teachers' sense of belonging. This pattern aligns with the "links" dimension of job embeddedness described by Lee *et al.* [15] and with social exchange theory proposed by Blau [21], where reciprocal support and recognition create obligations to remain; our data suggest that these social bonds can be as influential as formal incentives in retention decisions.

Faith and spirituality were also central to participants' narratives. Teachers described faith and meaning-making as vital in coping with difficulties, framing persistence as a divine calling. For many, prayer and spiritual practices served as sources of strength and reassurance. This finding echoes Trombka *et al.* [22], who argued that spiritual conviction enhances resilience in high-stress educational contexts. Similarly, König *et al.* [23] found that teachers who frame their work as vocation are more likely to remain despite hardships. Relative to scholarship on meaningful work by Rosso *et al.* [24] and calling and vocation by Dik *et al.* [25] the spiritual dimension observed here underscores an additional layer of value alignment that enhances persistence in fragile settings where secular supports are limited.

Persistence was also connected to professional identity and fulfillment. Teachers expressed pride in being educators and found fulfillment in seeing their students succeed. They viewed teaching not only as work but as a defining part of their identity. These results align with Greco and Krammer [26], who noted that professional identity reinforces teachers' commitment to long-term service. Likewise, Liu *et al.* [27] highlighted that fulfillment through student achievement offsets many of the burdens of teaching. This identity-anchored perspective complements turnover models emphasizing satisfaction and commitment, as proposed by Jaros [28], suggesting that identity work (who I am) is as consequential as job attitudes (how I feel) in influencing decisions to stay.

At the institutional level, supports and constraints significantly shaped teachers' persistence. Some participants reported that supportive leadership and recognition sustained them, while others lamented the lack of resources and the pressure of bureaucratic requirements. This reflects the findings of Scott *et al.* [29], who emphasized that supportive environments improve retention, while rigid policy demands often drive frustration. Similarly, Cahilog *et al.* [30] argued that institutional gaps force teachers to compensate with personal sacrifices, underscoring the need for systemic reforms. Viewed through classic motivation-hygiene and stressor frameworks, supportive leadership and recognition act as motivators, as described by Gimpl [31], whereas bureaucratic load functions as a hindrance stressor. Our data indicate that alleviating these hindrances can amplify the effect of motivators in resource-constrained schools.

Finally, teachers highlighted the role of family obligation and resilience practices in sustaining persistence. Many participants noted that family expectations and financial responsibilities bound them to their profession. At the same time, they relied on coping strategies such as prayer, peer conversations, and creative problem-solving to endure. These findings resonate with Kidd and Murray [32], who found that family responsibility often underpins teachers' persistence, and Zahid *et al.* [33] who observed that resilience practices help educators manage emotional strain in resource-limited settings. Compared with retention research in individualist contexts, these findings highlight collectivist obligations—such as intergenerational support—as salient “costs of exit” that reinforce embeddedness, as described by Lee *et al.* [15] suggesting that family-system factors should be explicitly incorporated into local retention frameworks.

The findings of this study carry important implications. Theoretically, they challenge the adequacy of rational-choice and burnout-centric models in explaining teacher motivation in fragile contexts, highlighting the need for frameworks that capture the complex interplay of moral, spiritual, and relational dimensions of professional life. For policymakers, the research suggests that interventions focused solely on material incentives, such as hazard pay, are insufficient. More effective strategies involve holistic support systems that strengthen relational networks, community ties, and vocational purpose—the key drivers of persistence. To inform scalable action, school systems can institutionalize collegial links through brief weekly mentoring triads, pair routine appreciative observation with concise feedback to reinforce competence, pilot bureaucracy-light reporting templates that free time for collaborative planning, and, where appropriate, provide inclusive reflection spaces alongside family-responsive scheduling that enhances perceived fit and reduces the cost of staying [13], [15], [25]. A practical division-level prototype is the “3–30–3” approach: three teachers per triad meeting for thirty minutes weekly, with three appreciative notes monthly, tracked via a one-page fidelity checklist and semesterly retention indicators.

This study is not without limitations. Its focus on a specific geographic region in the Philippines provides deep insights but may limit generalizability to other conflict-affected areas. The reliance on virtual interviews, though necessary, may have restricted the richness of contextual data that in-person ethnographic engagement could provide. While we propose actionable interventions aligned with the study's themes, causal effects on retention were not tested; these strategies should be piloted and evaluated through staggered rollouts or matched comparisons before broader adoption. Future research should examine this phenomenon in other fragile contexts, both within the Philippines and internationally. Longitudinal studies tracking teachers' experiences of persistence over time would provide valuable insight into how motivations and coping mechanisms evolve. Comparative research could also investigate how factors such as family obligation, spiritual vocation, and job embeddedness [15], together with psychological need satisfaction according to Deci and Ryan [13], jointly predict persistence relative to burnout frameworks [34] and rational-choice models presented by Adanali [14] in similar low-resource settings.

4. CONCLUSION

The teachers in this study exemplify a form of professional commitment that is both profound and precarious. Their persistence is not a simple refusal to leave, but a complex tapestry woven from threads of moral duty, spiritual faith, communal bonds, and a deeply felt professional identity. They teach where it hurts because, for them, the meaning derived from their work in the very heart of that hurt outweighs the considerable costs. By listening to their stories, we gain more than an understanding of teacher retention; we gain a deeper appreciation for the human capacity to create hope and stability on the most challenging frontiers of education. Their lived experience is a critical resource for reimagining how we can better support those who choose to serve in the world's most forgotten classrooms.

These narratives point toward modest, system-level efforts such as strengthening collegial ties, recognizing instructional effort, reducing bureaucratic frictions, creating inclusive spaces for reflection, and adopting family-responsive scheduling, that can be scaled within constrained budgets. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to describe the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers who persist in a conflict-affected Philippine setting, positioning the study as a baseline for policy design and evaluation. While context-bound, the underlying mechanisms of purpose, embeddedness, and identity likely resonate across other fragile environments; future work should test external validity through multi-site comparative studies and establish causal impacts via longitudinal and quasi-experimental evaluations of the proposed supports.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or non-financial conflicts that could have influenced the conduct, outcomes, or reporting of this study.

INFORMED CONSENT

The authors affirm that informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in this study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they provided.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study protocol received full approval from the Iligan Medical Center College Institutional Ethics Review Committee. Every measure was taken to protect participant rights and welfare. Informed consent was secured from all individuals, explicitly detailing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without prejudice. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and research documents, replaced by alphanumeric codes. All digital data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were encrypted and stored on a secure server accessible only to the principal investigator.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The qualitative data (interview transcripts and reflective journals) are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions, but de-identified excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author, [JDMP], upon reasonable request and subject to ethics approval.




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