

Original Article

Ten Years and Counting: Exploring the Experiences of Senior High School Teachers Experiencing Career Stagnation in Public Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of public senior high school teachers who have remained in the same rank for ten years, focusing on how they navigate career stagnation, maintain motivation, and preserve their professional identity. Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, ten teachers were interviewed through semi-structured conversations, supported by reflective notes and member checking. Five themes emerged: endurance amid professional plateauing, intrinsic motivation, emotional navigation of stagnation, reliance on social and professional support, and resilience through adaptive coping. Findings reveal that persistence stems not from resignation but from a deep sense of purpose, moral responsibility, and relational commitment. Despite systemic constraints, teachers exhibit professional growth, emotional regulation, and faith-driven resilience. The study suggests that career stagnation, when met with reflection and support, can become a space for transformation. Policy implications emphasize the need for mentorship systems, career enrichment programs, recognition frameworks, and wellness initiatives.

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1. Introduction

Career progression is widely regarded as a critical dimension of professional growth, job satisfaction, and motivation in the teaching profession (Abu-Tineh et al., 2023). In most educational systems, structured pathways for promotion, recognition, and professional development are designed to reward experience, competence, and continued learning (Foster et al., 2025). However, a notable subset of educators in public schools experiences prolonged periods without advancement, remaining in entry-level positions for a decade or more (Pagayanan, 2021). This phenomenon, often referred to as career stagnation, can have profound implications not only for individual teachers' professional identity but also for institutional effectiveness and student outcomes (Cunningham, 2020).

In the Philippine context, senior high school teachers in public schools are not immune to this issue. Many remain in the position, despite accumulating years of service, experience, and contributions to school programs (Bernardo et al., 2021). While the bureaucratic structure of the Department of Education provides clear guidelines for promotion, a combination of factors, including administrative bottlenecks, limited professional development opportunities, and resource constraints, often slows career mobility (Basabe & Galigao, 2024).

Existing research on teacher career trajectories tends to emphasize either early-career challenges or attrition, leaving a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences of teachers who persist in the same rank for prolonged periods (Heikila, 2025). Career stagnation challenges conventional models of motivation and professional satisfaction, influencing how teachers navigate years of limited recognition, the coping strategies they employ, their intrinsic motivations, and the institutional factors that support their decision to remain in the same rank (McCullough Hedelin, 2024).

Understanding the experiences of these teachers is particularly urgent in senior high school contexts, where teaching responsibilities are demanding, curriculum requirements are complex, and student developmental needs are increasingly diverse (Bacus & Alda, 2022). Career stagnation in such settings affects not only the well-being and morale of teachers but also the overall quality of instruction and school culture (Benevene et al., 2020).

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of senior high school teachers in public schools who have remained in the same rank for ten years. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the research aims to illuminate the meaning structures, motivations, and coping mechanisms that sustain teachers in prolonged periods of professional stagnation. Insights from this study provide a more nuanced understanding of teacher retention and career development, offering evidence that can inform policy reforms, targeted professional development, and institutional support mechanisms for educators navigating long-term career plateaus.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of senior high school teachers who have remained in the same rank for ten years or more. Guided by Colaizzi's procedural framework, the design facilitates a rigorous description of the essence of the phenomenon as consciously experienced by individuals. This approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the subjective realities of professional stagnation, focusing on how teachers make meaning of their prolonged tenure in the same position, their coping strategies, and their professional motivations. By privileging participants' first-person narratives, descriptive phenomenology allows for an intimate understanding of the structures of experience, moving beyond existing theories to illuminate the phenomenon on its own terms.

2.2 Participants

The study involved 10 senior high school teachers from public schools in Davao City. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria specifying a minimum of ten years in the same rank and current active teaching in a senior high school. Maximum variation sampling was employed to ensure diversity in terms of years of service (ranging from 10 to 18 years), subject specialization, and school location within the city. Initial contacts were established through school principals, who identified teachers meeting the inclusion criteria. Additional participants were recruited through referrals from the initial cohort. Theoretical saturation was achieved with the tenth participant, at which point no new interviews yielded novel themes.

2.3 Data Collection

Primary data were collected between July and September 2025 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Participants provided informed consent prior to engagement. The interviews began with a grand tour question: "Please describe your lived experience of remaining in the same rank for many years as a senior high school teacher," followed by probing questions exploring professional identity, coping strategies, perceptions of career progression, and sources of motivation and support. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. To enrich the data, participants were invited to submit reflective notes on their professional experiences and perceptions of career stagnation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the seven-step method outlined by Colaizzi. First, all transcripts and reflective materials were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and a holistic understanding. Second, significant statements relevant to the experience of career stagnation were extracted. Third, formulated meanings were derived from each significant statement, capturing the researcher's interpretation of the core content. Fourth, these meanings were organized into thematic clusters reflecting common patterns across participants. Fifth, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon was constructed. Sixth, the description was refined to articulate the essential structure of teachers' experiences of career stagnation. Finally, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to ensure the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation of interviews and reflective notes, and member checking. Dependability and confirmability were maintained via a comprehensive audit trail, including raw data, coding, theme development, and reflective memos documenting methodological decisions. Peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research provided an external check on interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of participants, the research context, and findings, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar educational settings.

3. Results

Ten participants, aged 29 to 46 years, participated in the study. The group comprised six female and four male teachers, all holding at least a bachelor's degree in education. Each participant had exactly ten years of continuous service in the same rank as a senior high school teacher. Their narratives reflect the lived experience of career stagnation, illustrating how teachers navigate professional plateauing, maintain motivation, and sustain identity despite remaining in the same position for a decade.

Theme 1: Endurance Through Professional Plateauing

Teachers described experiencing a professional plateau but framed their continued presence as a conscious endurance rather than resignation.

Acceptance of stagnation. Teachers indicated that accepting the lack of career progression allowed them to focus on teaching quality and professional responsibilities.

P1: "...I accept that my rank hasn't changed, but I focus on what I can control—my teaching."

P4: "...realizing promotion is slow has taught me patience and resilience."

P7: "...ten years in the same position has made me accept my path while continuing to perform my duties."

Persistence as commitment. Teachers emphasized that their decision to remain in the same rank reflected a deep commitment to students and the school community.

P2: "...staying despite stagnation shows my commitment to students and the school."

P5: "...my dedication is stronger than any frustration about titles."

P9: "...I remain here because I believe my role matters, not the promotion."

Professional mastery over rank. Participants highlighted that their continued presence allowed for professional growth, with skills and expertise expanding even if formal advancement did not occur.

P3: "...even if my title is the same, my skills have improved greatly over ten years."

P6: "...I see growth in what I can do as a teacher, which keeps me motivated."

P10: "...refining my teaching methods makes me feel accomplished despite stagnation."

Theme 2: Intrinsic Motivation as a Sustaining Force

Teachers described intrinsic motivation as a critical factor enabling them to remain in the same role for ten years.

Student-centered purpose. Participants emphasized that the progress and success of learners provided meaning for their continued service.

P1: "...students' success reminds me why I continue, even without career advancement."

P5: "...the growth of learners motivates me every day to stay."

P8: "...seeing my students succeed gives meaning to ten years in the same rank."

Personal satisfaction and mastery. Teachers highlighted that their personal fulfillment and sense of mastery sustained persistence despite stagnation.

P2: "...I feel proud of my teaching skills and knowledge, regardless of rank."

P4: "...improving my practice over the years gives me personal fulfillment."

P9: "...mastering content and pedagogy keeps me motivated."

Commitment to impact over reward. Participants indicated that their focus on making a meaningful difference outweighed the desire for promotion.

P3: "...the impact I have on students matters more than promotion."

P6: "...I stay because I see long-term benefits for learners, not for myself."

P10: "...helping students reach their potential validates my persistence."

Theme 3: Emotional Navigation of Career Stagnation

Teachers reported complex emotional experiences as they faced prolonged stagnation.

Frustration and discontent. Participants acknowledged that career stagnation often generated feelings of disappointment and demotivation.

P1: "...sometimes I feel disappointed by the lack of promotion."

P5: "...seeing peers advance while I remain here is frustrating."

P7: "...ten years in the same rank can feel demotivating at times."

Acceptance and adaptation. Teachers described that accepting their current situation and adapting expectations helped them cope with stagnation.

P2: "...I've learned to accept my rank and focus on daily teaching successes."

P4: "...adjusting expectations helps me cope with stagnation."

P9: "...acceptance of the situation allows me to concentrate on what I can change."

Renewed purpose through reflection. Participants used self-reflection to reconnect with the reasons they entered the teaching profession, which helped them endure stagnation.

P3: "...reflecting on why I entered teaching renews my motivation."

P6: "...journaling and reviewing accomplishments help me stay positive."

P10: "...I remind myself of my contribution to students' lives to overcome frustration."

Theme 4: Social and Professional Support Networks

Teachers emphasized that supportive networks of colleagues, students, and administrators played a key role in sustaining persistence.

Colleague collaboration. Participants noted that working closely with peers created a sense of shared responsibility and support.

P1: "...working with supportive peers keeps me motivated."

P4: "...discussing challenges with co-teachers strengthens my resolve."

P8: "...colleagues provide advice and encouragement, which helps me endure stagnation."

Student relationships. Teachers highlighted that strong bonds with students reinforced their professional identity and commitment.

P2: "...students' appreciation reminds me that my work matters."

P5: "...seeing students trust me motivates me to continue."

P9: "...relationships with learners make persistence rewarding."

Administrative recognition. Participants described how recognition from school leadership helped them feel valued and motivated to continue.

P3: "...support from principals makes me feel valued despite stagnation."

P6: "...acknowledgment of my efforts encourages me to remain in my role."

P10: "...small gestures of appreciation sustain my morale and motivation."

Theme 5: Resilience and Adaptive Coping Strategies

Teachers shared the strategies they used to sustain their professional engagement and manage stress during career stagnation.

Faith and meaning-making. Participants emphasized that spirituality and personal beliefs provided strength to continue teaching despite stagnation.

P1: "...prayer gives me strength to face stagnation."

P4: "...faith reminds me of the greater purpose in teaching."

P8: "...spiritual reflection helps me endure challenges."

Self-reflection and goal-setting. Teachers described personal reflection and the setting of attainable goals as tools to maintain focus and motivation.

P2: "...setting small goals helps me maintain focus."

P5: "...journaling my experiences allows me to process frustrations."

P9: "...reflecting on progress motivates me to continue."

Peer support and mentorship. Participants acknowledged that guidance and encouragement from peers and mentors strengthened their resilience.

P3: "...sharing experiences with colleagues keeps me grounded."

P6: "...peer guidance strengthens my ability to handle challenges."

P10: "...mentorship provides perspective and encouragement to persist."

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of senior high school teachers who have remained in the same rank for ten years, highlighting how they navigate career stagnation while maintaining motivation and professional identity. The thematic analysis of interview data revealed key insights into the endurance strategies, intrinsic motivators, emotional experiences, social supports, and resilience practices that sustain teachers in their roles despite limited opportunities for advancement.

The first theme, endurance through professional plateauing, revealed that participants framed career stagnation not as failure but as deliberate and conscious persistence. Teachers emphasized acceptance of their current rank, continued commitment to students, and mastery of professional skills despite the lack of

promotion. This finding aligns with Dunn (2020), who suggested that professional endurance can be viewed as an ethical commitment rather than solely a response to external incentives. Participants' narratives indicated that enduring stagnation was closely tied to a sense of responsibility to their students and school communities. From a theoretical perspective, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) provides a lens to understand this theme, as intrinsic motivators such as achievement, responsibility, and recognition were reported to sustain persistence even when extrinsic factors, like promotions, were limited. Teachers' engagement with professional mastery reflects how intrinsic motivators can buffer dissatisfaction related to career plateauing.

The second theme, intrinsic motivation as a sustaining force, revealed that teachers' persistence was deeply anchored in the purpose and impact of their work. Despite a decade in the same rank, participants cited student success, personal fulfillment, and commitment to long-term impact as primary motivators. This complements Yao and Zhao (2024) on vocation and calling, indicating that internalized purpose buffers the negative effects of professional plateauing. In theoretical terms, Self-Determination Theory, as proposed by Deci & Ryan (2000), explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to sustained motivation. Teachers' focus on student-centered outcomes and personal mastery demonstrates that intrinsic satisfaction can maintain engagement even in the absence of external rewards or advancement opportunities.

The emotional navigation of career stagnation, the third theme, illustrates the complex affective experiences that teachers endure during prolonged career plateauing. Participants acknowledged frustration and demotivation but described adaptive strategies such as acceptance, reflection, and renewed purpose. This echoes McCormick et al. (2019), who suggested that professional endurance involves not only cognitive calculation but also emotional regulation. The theme aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory by Hobfoll (1989), which posits that individuals strive to protect valued resources, including energy, time, and psychological well-being. By reframing stagnation as a manageable challenge and drawing on reflective strategies, teachers preserve emotional resources while maintaining their commitment to professional goals.

The fourth theme, social and professional support networks, highlighted the significance of relational resources in sustaining teachers during career stagnation. Collegial collaboration, supportive student relationships, and administrative recognition emerged as critical elements reinforcing persistence. This finding aligns with Imboden's (2024) suggestion that supportive networks foster belonging, affirmation, and commitment. From a theoretical perspective, Social Exchange Theory, as proposed by Blau (1964), helps explain this dynamic: reciprocal relationships with colleagues and administrators provide both tangible and intangible support, thereby reinforcing teachers' decision to stay. The emotional and professional support embedded in these networks strengthens persistence by creating obligations, norms of reciprocity, and a sense of community that compensates for limited extrinsic advancement.

The fifth theme, resilience and adaptive coping strategies, demonstrated that teachers actively engaged in practices to maintain professional and emotional well-being. Participants relied on faith, self-reflection, goal setting, and mentorship to manage stress and sustain their engagement. These strategies are echoed by McDonough et al. (2021), who emphasized resilience practices as critical for educators navigating challenging contexts. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, as outlined by Bandura (1986), supports this finding, highlighting self-efficacy as a key determinant of sustained effort and adaptive coping. Teachers' use of reflection, goal-setting, and peer support illustrates how self-regulatory behaviors enhance resilience and reinforce persistence, allowing them to proactively navigate career stagnation.

The findings of this study carry implications for practice. Interventions aimed solely at promotion or material incentives may be insufficient. Instead, cultivating relational supports, fostering recognition, and encouraging reflective practices can strengthen teachers' intrinsic motivation and professional commitment. Practical strategies might include structured peer-mentorship programs, regular reflective sessions, and recognition initiatives that affirm teachers' long-term contributions despite formal career plateauing.

This study has limitations. Its focus on a specific geographic region may limit generalizability, and reliance on interviews may not fully capture contextual nuances observable in longitudinal or ethnographic studies. Future research could examine experiences of career stagnation in diverse educational contexts, track motivational trajectories over time, or explore the interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in sustaining professional engagement. Comparative studies could also investigate how culture, family obligations, and vocational calling intersect to influence teacher persistence relative to burnout and rational-choice models.

5. Conclusion

The teachers in this study exemplify a form of professional commitment that is both deliberate and resilient. Their persistence is not merely a refusal to leave, but a complex interplay of moral responsibility, intrinsic motivation, relational support, and a strong sense of professional identity. Despite spending ten years in the same rank, they navigated professional plateauing, emotional challenges, and uncertainty with resilience, finding purpose and fulfillment in the growth and success of their students. For these educators, the meaning derived from their work outweighs the limitations imposed by career stagnation. Listening to their experiences provides insights not only into teacher retention but also into the human capacity to sustain professional engagement and motivation over prolonged periods of limited advancement.

These findings suggest practical strategies for educational policy and school-level support. Strengthening collegial collaboration, recognizing instructional effort, reducing bureaucratic burdens, providing structured mentorship, fostering reflective practices, and adopting family-responsive schedules are all approaches that can reinforce teacher persistence. Specifically, the Department of Education (DepEd) can

formalize mentorship programs, offer career development workshops for teachers in long-standing positions, implement recognition systems for teaching excellence beyond promotions, and provide opportunities for skill mastery and leadership growth. Such initiatives can address the frustrations associated with career stagnation while maintaining teacher motivation, professional identity, and overall well-being.

This study is the first to explore the lived experiences of senior high school teachers who persist in their roles despite ten years of career stagnation. While context-specific to public senior high schools in the Philippines, the underlying mechanisms of persistence—purpose, relational embeddedness, and professional identity—are likely applicable in other educational settings where teachers face limited career advancement opportunities. Future research should investigate these phenomena across multiple schools and regions, employing longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at sustaining teacher engagement and mitigating the effects of career stagnation. By centering teachers' lived experiences, this study informs evidence-based policies and practices that honor both the professional and human dimensions of teaching, enhancing retention, motivation, and professional fulfillment nationwide.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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