Original Article

The Exit Point: Uncovering the Participation Behind Educators' Departure from the Department of Education

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Abstract

Teacher attrition remains a critical concern for public education systems because it affects instructional continuity, teacher morale, and school stability. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of ten former public elementary school teachers from Manay North District, Division of Davao Oriental, who voluntarily left the Department of Education after at least five continuous years of service. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through thematic analysis. Member checking, reflexive documentation, and triangulation of interviews, field notes, and available institutional records supported trustworthiness. Findings showed that departure was shaped by three interrelated challenge themes: excessive system demands, weak institutional support, and damaged well-being. Participants coped through personal management, support networks, and meaning-making, yet these strategies had limited effect when organizational stressors persisted. Based on the findings, a ten-phase enhancement program for professional growth was developed to strengthen workload management, communication, resource support, wellness, mentoring, teacher recognition, and program evaluation. The study concludes that voluntary exit from public teaching was not primarily a loss of commitment to learners, but a response to accumulated work demands, limited voice, and compromised well-being. Teacher retention initiatives should therefore move beyond individual resilience and

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address the organizational conditions that make teaching sustainable.

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1. Introduction

Teacher attrition has become a major concern in education systems because the loss of experienced teachers disrupts instructional continuity, reduces institutional memory, and intensifies staffing pressures in schools. UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) framed teacher shortages as a global challenge that requires attention not only to recruitment, but also to the conditions that allow teachers to remain in the profession. The issue is therefore not limited to the number of individuals who enter teacher education or accept teaching posts. It also concerns whether schools offer professional environments where teachers can sustain competence, purpose, health, and dignity across time.

Recent research links teachers' intention to leave with burnout, high workload, low autonomy, weak support, and unfavorable working conditions. Madigan and Kim (2021) showed through meta-analytic evidence that teacher burnout has a strong association with attrition intention, while Räsänen et al. (2020) documented that the desire to leave the profession can persist when the school environment fails to meet teachers' professional and personal needs. These findings support the view that resignation should not be reduced to an individual preference or a lack of dedication. Rather, it often reflects a cumulative response to demands that exceed teachers' available resources.

The Job Demands-Resources model offers a useful explanation for this pattern because it links work strain to the balance between demands and resources. Demerouti et al. (2001) argued that heavy job demands may lead to exhaustion when employees lack sufficient resources, such as supportive leadership, autonomy, clear procedures, and collegial support. In public schools, these demands may include documentation, large classes, shifting directives, community-related tasks, and other non-instructional responsibilities. When such demands accumulate, teachers may experience reduced motivation, diminished efficacy, and a stronger desire to leave.

Teacher well-being is also central to the problem of attrition. Hascher and Waber (2021) described teacher well-being as a complex construct influenced by professional, emotional, social, and organizational conditions, while Dreer (2023) emphasized that teacher well-being has important consequences for motivation, commitment, and performance. Toropova et al. (2021) likewise found that school working conditions are closely related to teacher job satisfaction. These studies indicate that retention requires more than professional development workshops or performance monitoring. It requires an institutional climate where teachers can

perform work without constant threat to personal health, family life, and professional identity.

Motivation and professional identity further shape the decision to stay or leave. Self-determination theory explains that motivation is strengthened when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When teachers feel controlled by rigid systems, judged by compliance requirements, or disconnected from decision processes, their intrinsic commitment may weaken even if they retain concern for learners. Role Exit Theory also clarifies why departure can become a staged process rather than a sudden act. Ebaugh (1988) described role exit as a movement from first doubts to the search for alternatives, a turning point, and eventual identity reconstruction outside the prior role.

In the Philippine public education system, teacher workload and administrative tasks have received increased policy attention. The Department of Education (2024a) issued guidelines on the rationalization of teachers' workload in public schools, while the Department of Education (2024b) released further guidance on the workweek and compensated teaching overload. These recent policies acknowledge that workload is a material factor in teacher effectiveness and welfare. However, the lived experiences of teachers who had already left the system remain less visible in policy and research conversations. Their accounts are important because they reveal how policies, school routines, leadership practices, and personal well-being intersect before resignation occurs.

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of former public elementary school teachers who voluntarily left the Department of Education. The setting was Manay North District in the Division of Davao Oriental, a context where public elementary teachers' work included instructional tasks, administrative compliance, school activities, and community demands. By centering the voices of former educators, this study moves beyond general explanations of attrition and examines the meanings teachers attached to their decision to leave.

Specifically, the study explored the challenges that led educators to leave the Department of Education, the coping strategies they used during their tenure, and an enhancement program for professional growth that may respond to the issues raised by their narratives. The study contributes to teacher attrition scholarship by presenting resignation as both an occupational and identity-related experience. It also offers practice-based implications for school heads, education authorities, and teacher support systems that seek to promote retention through sustainable work conditions, responsive communication, wellness support, and meaningful professional growth.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of former public elementary school teachers who voluntarily left the Department of Education. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study

sought to understand how participants interpreted their professional experiences, the conditions that preceded their exit, and the meaning they assigned to departure rather than to measure variables numerically. Phenomenology was also suited to the inquiry because it allowed the research to describe the shared essence of a common experience while preserving the distinct personal accounts of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon examined in this study was voluntary departure from the public teaching role after years of service in the elementary school system.

The participants were ten former public elementary school teachers from Manay North District, Division of Davao Oriental. Purposive sampling was used because the study required participants with direct and information-rich experience of the phenomenon. Participants qualified for inclusion if they were licensed former public elementary school teachers, had completed at least five continuous years of service in the Department of Education, had served in Manay North District, and had formally resigned from government service within the last five years. Teachers who left because of retirement, termination, suspension, age-related reasons, or health-related reasons were excluded because the study focused on voluntary exit connected with personal, professional, or institutional conditions.

Primary qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews guided by a researcher-made interview protocol. The interview guide contained open-ended questions about participants' work experiences, challenges before resignation, coping strategies while in service, turning points that shaped their decision, and recommendations for professional growth. The instrument was reviewed by experts in qualitative research and education to ensure relevance, clarity, and ethical appropriateness. Probing questions were used when necessary to clarify responses and to elicit detailed accounts. Interviews were conducted in private and secure settings agreed upon by the participants, either face-to-face or through a secure online audio platform, based on availability and comfort.

Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Permission was secured from the Graduate School, and ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee before participant recruitment. Each participant received an informed consent form that described the study purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw or decline any question without penalty. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participant codes such as P1 and P2 were retained for reporting. Audio files and transcripts were stored in encrypted and password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, with guidance from the reflexive and systematic procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2021). The researcher first listened to recordings and read transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Meaningful statements were then coded, and related codes were grouped to form candidate themes aligned with the research questions. These themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and

adequate evidentiary support. Final themes were named to reflect their core meanings and were reported with exemplar quotations from participants. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, verbatim transcription, reflexive journaling, documentation of analytic decisions, and triangulation of interview data with field notes and available institutional records. The criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability guided the quality procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Results

3.1 Challenges That Led Educators to Leave the Department of Education

Theme 1: Excessive System Demands

This theme captured the participants' accounts of work requirements that extended beyond classroom instruction and accumulated through paperwork, multiple roles, and urgent deadlines. Participants described repeated documentation, overlapping assignments, and last-minute submissions as regular conditions before their departure.

> *"There were always forms, reports, documentation, and sudden requests from different offices." (P1)*
> *"I felt that I was no longer only a teacher. I became a clerk, encoder, organizer, counselor, social worker, report maker, and sometimes even the one who had to answer concerns that were beyond my control." (P1)*
> *"We would receive a memo today, and the output was due the next day." (P6)*

Theme 2: Weak Institutional Support

This theme described conditions in which participants reported limited materials, unclear communication, and minimal response to teacher concerns. Participants stated that resource limitations and top-down decisions affected their capacity to meet expectations and contributed to their decision to leave.

> *"We were told to improve learner outcomes, but we did not always have enough reading materials, printing support, or time for one-on-one help." (P4)*
> *"Communication was often top-down. Decisions were already final before teachers were informed." (P1)*
> *"I felt discouraged because our concern was real, but it was treated as ordinary." (P10)*

Theme 3: Damaged Well-Being

This theme represented participants' descriptions of emotional exhaustion, physical strain, disrupted rest, and reduced personal time. Participants linked their departure to fatigue, health concerns, and the loss of personal and family time caused by work demands.

> *"I went home that day and cried because I felt invisible." (P1)*
> *"I had sleep problems. I often woke up in the middle of the night and remembered something I forgot to submit." (P2)*
> *"I missed family events, worked late at night, and used weekends for school documents." (P9)*

3.2 Coping Strategies Used During Their Tenure in the Department of Education

Theme 1: Personal Management

This theme described individual strategies participants used to organize tasks, set boundaries, and calm themselves during periods of stress. Participants used lists, personal rules, short pauses, prayer, rest, and limits on non-urgent messages when possible.

> *"I made a daily list of tasks and identified only the most urgent ones." (P1)*
> *"I stopped answering non-urgent messages late at night." (P2)*
> *"I used prayer, short rest, and simple planning." (P8)*

Theme 2: Support Networks

This theme captured the use of collegial, family, and outside support to cope with workload and emotional strain. Participants relied on colleagues for materials and advice, family for encouragement, and friends for listening and perspective.

> *"Colleagues helped me by sharing materials, advice, and encouragement." (P1)*
> *"My family reminded me that I was more than my job." (P2)*
> *"When I felt close to burnout, a friend invited me for coffee and simply listened." (P3)*

Theme 3: Meaning-Making

This theme represented how participants used learner progress, professional purpose, and self-preservation to make sense of difficult work experiences.

Participants described learner improvement as a source of meaning while also recognizing that personal health had to be protected.

> *"I reminded myself that learners should not suffer because adults had problems in the workplace." (P1)*
> *"When a child who could not read finally read a simple sentence, I felt that the work still had meaning." (P2)*
> *"I could love the profession and still admit that the system was hurting me." (P10)*

3.3 Proposed Enhancement Program for Professional Growth

The analysis produced a professional enhancement program titled Sustaining Educators' Growth and Well-Being: A Professional Enhancement Program for Teacher Retention. The proposed program contains ten implementation phases focused on workload management, role clarification, communication, resource support, wellness, work-life balance, mentoring, teacher recognition, and evaluation.

The program was structured as a school-year implementation plan with identified activities, responsible persons, and expected outputs. The table below presents the proposed timeline and implementation plan.

Table 1. Timeline and implementation plan of the proposed enhancement program for professional growth.

Phase and timeline	Key activities	Persons involved	Expected output
Phase 1: Preparation and Orientation (June)	Presentation of the proposed enhancement program to school administrators and teachers; orientation on activities, implementation procedures, and teacher participation.	School Head; Department Heads; Teachers	Increased awareness and understanding of the enhancement program.
Phase 2: Workload and Documentation Management (July-August)	Conduct training workshops on efficient documentation, report preparation, and time management. Introduce standardized templates, digital filing systems, and organized reporting schedules to minimize overlapping submissions and paperwork burden.	School Head; ICT Coordinator; Teachers	Improved documentation practices and reduced paperwork stress.
Phase 3: Role Clarification and Deadline Management (September)	Organize consultation meetings to clarify teaching and non-teaching responsibilities. Develop a school task calendar, establish advance-notice protocols for submissions, and monitor deadlines to reduce urgent and last-minute tasks.	School Head; Department Heads; Teachers; Non-teaching Personnel	Clearer task distribution and improved deadline management.
Phase 4: Communication and Teacher Consultation (October)	Conduct leadership dialogue sessions, consultation meetings, and communication workshops that support open discussion and regular feedback between leaders	School Head; HR Coordinator; Teachers	Improved communication and stronger teacher participation.

	and teachers. Establish accessible communication channels for concerns and suggestions.		
Phase 5: Resource Support and Instructional Assistance (November)	Organize resource-sharing activities and establish instructional materials banks and digital repositories. Conduct collaborative sessions for instructional materials, classroom strategies, and remediation practices.	School Head; Master Teachers; ICT Coordinator; PTA Officers	Greater access to instructional resources and classroom support.
Phase 6: Wellness and Emotional Support Activities (December-January)	Conduct wellness seminars and stress management workshops focused on emotional resilience, burnout prevention, self-care, and psychosocial support services when needed.	Guidance Counselor; School Wellness Committee; Teachers	Improved emotional well-being and stress management practices.
Phase 7: Work-Life Balance and Boundary Setting (February)	Facilitate seminars on work-life balance, personal boundary setting, and time management. Develop guidelines for after-hours communication and encourage wellness breaks and healthy scheduling practices.	School Head; HR Coordinator; Teachers	Healthier work boundaries and improved personal time protection.
Phase 8: Mentoring and Support Network Program (March)	Establish peer mentoring groups and teacher support circles that promote collaboration, shared experiences, and collective problem-solving. Conduct regular mentoring sessions and professional sharing activities for emotional and professional support.	Master Teachers; Guidance Counselor; Teachers	Stronger collegial relationships and support systems.
Phase 9: Purpose Renewal and Teacher Recognition (April)	Conduct reflection and sharing sessions about meaningful teaching experiences, learner successes, and personal growth. Organize recognition and appreciation activities that acknowledge teachers' efforts and professional commitment.	School Head; Master Teachers; Teachers; PTA Officers	Increased teacher motivation, professional identity, and sense of purpose.
Phase 10: Monitoring and Evaluation (May)	Collect feedback through evaluation forms, consultation meetings, and monitoring activities to assess program effectiveness and sustainability.	School Head; Research Coordinator; Teachers	Evaluation results and recommendations for program improvement.

4. Discussion

The findings show that voluntary departure from the Department of Education was a cumulative process shaped by work demands, limited organizational support, and compromised well-being. This pattern aligns with the Job Demands-Resources model, in which Demerouti et al. (2001) explained that exhaustion can arise when job demands remain high and resources remain insufficient. In the present study, documentation, multiple roles, urgent deadlines, limited materials, and weak communication served as recurring demands. Madigan and Kim (2021) similarly

connected burnout with attrition intention, which suggests that these participants' exits reflected a predictable response to prolonged strain rather than an isolated personal decision.

The theme of excessive system demands indicates that teachers' work had expanded beyond instruction into clerical, coordinating, counseling, reporting, and community-related roles. This finding has policy relevance because the Department of Education (2024a) recognized the need to rationalize teachers' workload, and the Department of Education (2024b) clarified policies on the workweek and compensated overload. The participants' narratives suggest that formal policy attention must be matched by school-level implementation, advance scheduling, realistic reporting systems, and task distribution that protects instructional time. Without such alignment, the teacher role may continue to absorb responsibilities that weaken teaching quality and personal sustainability.

Weak institutional support was evident in limited resources, delayed communication, and dismissed teacher voice. Toropova et al. (2021) found that school working conditions are important to teacher job satisfaction, and Hascher and Waber (2021) emphasized that teacher well-being depends on organizational as well as personal factors. The participants' statements show that resource shortage was not only a material problem. It also communicated to teachers that they were expected to meet high expectations without adequate support. From the perspective of self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2020) would frame the absence of voice, autonomy, and relatedness as a threat to sustained motivation.

Damaged well-being emerged through emotional exhaustion, physical symptoms, sleep disruption, and loss of personal time. Dreer (2023) synthesized evidence that teacher well-being affects professional outcomes, while Madigan and Kim (2021) showed that burnout is closely tied to leaving intentions. The present findings add qualitative depth by showing how stress became embodied in headaches, fatigue, poor sleep, late-night worry, and missed family time. These accounts suggest that teacher well-being should not be treated as an optional wellness activity. It must be understood as an institutional condition for professional continuity.

The coping strategies identified in the study demonstrate that teachers were not passive in the face of difficulty. They organized tasks, set boundaries when possible, used prayer and short rest, relied on colleagues and family, and held on to learner progress as a source of meaning. These strategies are consistent with research that connects well-being, relatedness, and purpose with motivation and professional commitment (Dreer, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, the findings also reveal a limit to individual coping. Personal management can reduce immediate stress, but it cannot fully compensate for unclear systems, insufficient resources, or persistent workload demands.

Meaning-making was especially important because participants continued to value learners even as they recognized that the system had become harmful to them. Ebaugh's (1988) Role Exit Theory helps interpret this tension because departure from a valued role often involves doubt, reflection, a turning point, and reconstruction of

identity. The statement that one can love the profession while admitting that the system is harmful reflects this process. It shows that resignation can represent self-preservation rather than rejection of teaching. Räsänen et al. (2020) similarly indicated that leaving intentions may persist when teachers cannot reconcile commitment with unsustainable working conditions.

The proposed enhancement program responds to the finding that teacher retention requires both individual capacity and institutional reform. Sims et al. (2023) argued that effective teacher professional development should have a clear theory of change and must connect activities to mechanisms that improve practice. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) likewise emphasized that supportive learning environments and whole-child approaches depend on adults who also receive relational and organizational support. In this study, the proposed program links workload training, communication mechanisms, wellness sessions, peer mentoring, resource sharing, and teacher recognition to the specific themes raised by former teachers. This alignment makes the program more responsive than a generic training plan.

At the system level, the findings support the call of UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) to transform the teaching profession through support, recognition, and sustainable working conditions. Recruitment alone cannot solve attrition if schools fail to address the lived realities that push experienced teachers away. The study suggests that teacher retention in similar contexts requires attention to workload calendars, administrative simplification, psychosocial support, participatory leadership, and recognition of teacher voice. These measures are not peripheral to educational quality. They form part of the conditions that allow teachers to remain effective, healthy, and committed.

The study contributes to teacher attrition literature by documenting how former public elementary school teachers narrated their exit after they had left the system. This perspective is important because former teachers can describe not only immediate stressors, but also the turning points and reflections that became clearer after resignation. The findings extend quantitative evidence on burnout and attrition by showing the concrete experiences behind the decision to leave: repeated paperwork, role overload, ignored concerns, resource gaps, emotional invisibility, and loss of rest. For school leaders, these accounts offer actionable evidence that retention policies should begin with listening to teachers before resignation becomes the only viable response.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the voluntary departure of former public elementary school teachers from the Department of Education was shaped by interrelated organizational and personal conditions rather than by a simple decline in commitment to teaching. Participants left after repeated experiences of excessive system demands, weak institutional support, and damaged well-being. Although they used personal

management, support networks, and meaning-making to cope, these strategies were not enough when the sources of strain remained embedded in school systems and work routines.

The findings point to the need for teacher retention strategies that are grounded in teachers' lived experiences. A professional enhancement program for teacher retention should therefore combine workload management, clearer roles, responsive communication, resource support, wellness, work-life balance, mentoring, recognition, and continuous evaluation. The study affirms that teachers can remain deeply committed to learners while also recognizing that unsustainable conditions require change. Protecting teacher well-being and professional dignity is essential to sustain quality public education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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