

Choosing Stability over Promotion: Career Plateau Dynamics in the Philippines Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry investigated the lived experiences of full-time public high school teachers within the Department of Education Schools Division of Negros Occidental who intentionally choose career stability and classroom permanence over vertical administrative promotion. Grounded in Clark Moustakas transcendental phenomenological framework, the study deconstructed the qualitative empirical narratives of six mid-career Junior High School and Senior High School educators through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to illuminate both the textural and structural dimensions of this critical vocational choice. Comprehensive thematic data analysis revealed a complex interplay between systemic institutional friction and personal autonomy, organized across three standardized core themes: first, Institutional Immobilization; second, Subversive Sanctuaries; and third, Self-Preservation and Extrinsic Decoupling. Participants described navigating severe plantilla quota constraints, heavy administrative compliance burdens, and perceived inconsistencies between classroom instructional performance and upward professional mobility. In response, these veteran educators cultivated strategic personal boundaries and intentional detachment from administrative advancement. By deliberately decoupling their sense of professional worth from external organizational milestones, these veteran teachers successfully reclaimed personal agency within an unresponsive bureaucratic environment. The textural and structural synthesis revealed the core essence of this phenomenon: for these six teachers, prolonged career plateauing was experienced not solely as institutional stagnation, but rather as a deliberate re-anchoring of professional identity toward classroom teaching, family well-being, and personal peace. Ultimately, the study illustrates how public school educators can effectively transform the classroom into a meaningful space of pedagogical purpose, reallocating their daily time, professional attention, and emotional energy toward holistic self-preservation within a rigid, highly centralized institutional framework.

Keywords: Career stability, classroom permanence, Junior and Senior High School teachers, DepEd Philippines, transcendental phenomenology, administrative burden, teacher well-being, career plateau

INTRODUCTION

Climbing the institutional ladder has long been treated as the ultimate marker of career success. Traditional workplace models assume that moving upward naturally boosts morale and job satisfaction (Locke & Latham, 2019). When an employee stops advancing, standard management literature quickly labels it a "career plateau"—often assuming the individual has lost ambition (Bardwick, 1986). However, recent research shows that how workers view this pause determines their actual behavior; emotional commitment dictates whether a plateaued professional retreats into silence, stays resilient, or walks away entirely (Jiang et al., 2022).

Conventional administrative frameworks almost always view career plateaus as organizational failures (Tremblay, 2021). For years, performance studies have argued that stagnation lowers academic productivity (Lapalme et al., 2009) and creates frustrating operational bottlenecks for mid-career public sector workers (OECD, 2021). In Philippine basic education, this stagnation is driven by both personal choice and systemic barriers (David et al., 2019). Strict quota restrictions under the Department of Budget and Management's (DBM) Position Classification and Compensation Scheme create severe bottlenecks, limiting higher-tier plantilla designations like Master Teacher roles (EDCOM II, 2024). As a result, teachers face a grueling 15-year wait just to advance from Teacher I to Teacher III (World Bank, 2016; PIDS, 2020).

Yet, this systemic institutional inertia reveals a striking human reality. Despite heavy administrative burdens and systemic hurdles, many educators in the Schools Division of Negros Occidental intentionally choose classroom permanence over promotion. Their dedication proves that professional fulfillment does not require an administrative title (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Instead of judging these teachers through corporate metrics, there is an urgent need to understand how they construct meaning and find peace within a rigid bureaucracy—a gap highlighted by recent national reports on public sector welfare (EDCOM II, 2024). Moving away from deficit-focused metrics, this qualitative study steps into the actual lived experiences of educators. Grounded in Clark Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological framework, this inquiry uncovers the internal shifts and existential choices that lead teachers to prioritize the classroom over promotion (Moustakas, 1994). By centering their voices, this research reframes the career plateau from an assumed professional defeat into an active, self-determined act of vocational fulfillment.

METHODOLOGY

Grounded in Clark Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological tradition, this qualitative study examined how public high school teachers in the Philippines created meaning and found fulfillment when choosing classroom stability over administrative promotion within centralized bureaucracies. By practicing disciplined *epoché*—intentionally setting personal biases aside—the design ensured an authentic, reliable view of how educators experienced and adapted to long-term career plateaus. Using targeted criterion sampling (Campbell et al., 2020), the study purposefully selected six permanent Junior and Senior High School teachers from public schools in Negros Occidental. To capture rich, detailed accounts of structural career plateaus, participants met strict background requirements: 12 to 15 years of total teaching service and at least a decade at their current rank without promotion (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Data were systematically analyzed following Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam framework. The analytical process involved horizontalization (assigning equal weight to all participant statements), isolating invariant constituents by eliminating repetitive details, and organizing core responses into thematic meaning clusters. These steps were integrated into detailed textural and structural descriptions, capturing both the lived experience and institutional realities of mid-career teacher resilience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Moustakas, 1994).

Following Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological framework, the data collection unfolded across four clear stages—from securing official permissions and obtaining informed consent to holding detailed interviews and having teachers verify their transcripts—ensuring the research remained both methodologically sound and ethically grounded throughout (Seidman, 2019).

To ensure qualitative rigor, this study relied on credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability instead of traditional statistical measures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established by building open rapport with teachers and returning transcripts for member-checking, while dependability and confirmability were maintained through a detailed audit trail and reflective management of bias (Larsen & Adu, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, transferability was made possible by providing rich contextual details, giving other researchers the clear background needed to see how these findings might apply to similar public school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure the highest standard of moral and professional responsibility, this study rigidly adhered to established qualitative research ethics guidelines. Because the inquiry delved into the personal and professional lived experiences of veteran teachers within a public bureaucracy, the researcher systematically implemented safeguards to protect the well-being, rights, and dignity of the participants. The ethical protocol was structured around four core pillars: informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, prevention of harm, and data privacy management.

Using Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method, the data were systematically analyzed step-by-step to draw out the essence of mid-career teacher resilience. The process began with reflexive management of bias to set aside personal assumptions, followed by horizontalization, treating every participant's statement with equal value so no perspective was overlooked. Invariant constituents were then isolated by eliminating non-essential or repetitive details, and these constituents were organized into thematic meaning clusters (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, textual and structural descriptions were integrated to capture both what the

teachers experienced and how institutional policies shaped those lived experiences (Larsen & Adu, 2021; Moustakas, 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter reveals the qualitative findings on how mid-career public secondary school teachers experience and make sense of career plateauing within the Department of Education. Grounded in Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological framework, the analysis draws directly from in-depth semi-structured interviews. Using line-by-line coding, significant statements were isolated and clustered into three overarching themes. Setting up a clear thematic hierarchy helps build a transparent, traceable path from the raw voices of participants to broader organizational insights (Larsen & Adu, 2025).

Theme 1: Institutional Immobilization

The first major theme, Institutional Immobilization, captures the structural friction, policy bottlenecks, and institutional immobilization that constrain upward career mobility within the public education system. This institutional immobilization triggers a profound psychological shift among veteran educators: the gradual erosion of initial meritocratic hope and the subsequent manifestation of defensive cynicism. Entering the Department of Education under the belief that instructional dedication, hard work, and top-tier evaluation scores would naturally yield a smooth promotional trajectory, participants instead encountered prolonged rank stagnation that shattered these expectations. Remaining at the Teacher I rank for a decade despite consistent service led educators to perceive a disconnect between classroom excellence and administrative recognition, forcing them to build an emotional shield of cynicism to safeguard their well-being against a rigid bureaucracy perceived as indifferent to long-term loyalty.

Participant disclosures illustrate how systemic bottlenecks and strict evaluation metrics impede rank progression:

"I felt sorry for myself within these years seeing teachers younger than me who gets promoted while I, serves DepEd for 10 years and still a Teacher I."

P1

For others, rigid procedural technicalities within performance evaluation frameworks presented insurmountable barriers to advancement:

"I waited for years, but until today, year 2026, nothing happened... Despite gaining an Outstanding rating since 2016 in the overall IPCRF rating, that one US [Unsatisfactory] in the past three years impeded my chance to be promoted."

P2

Furthermore, narrative disclosures reflected a pervasive perception among participants that promotional processes were frequently influenced by informal administrative channels rather than objective merit:

"There are stories unfolded about the promotional system in our school where those who are close to office personnel are more likely to be promoted and those who are not gets rejected... participants perceived palakasan/favoritism in promotional processes and that includes corruption and 'padrino system'."

P4

Theme 2: Subversive Sanctuaries

The second major theme, Subversive Sanctuaries, illuminates a crucial emotional survival strategy: the deliberate, paradox-driven realignment of personal, professional, and existential priorities. Rather than succumbing to total despair in the face of an unresponsive division infrastructure, educators consciously construct "sanctuaries" by

pulling their emotional energy away from unyielding administrative ladders and redirecting it into domains they can directly control—specifically, classroom instruction and domestic life.

Participants described establishing firm boundaries against vertical mobility. Realizing that pursuing higher administrative ranks required taking on overwhelming stress that directly compromised domestic stability, educators actively re-centered their focus. They placed a premium on family life, personal peace, and instructional continuity, finding that genuine professional fulfillment lies in intrinsic rewards—such as mentoring learners—rather than organizational titles.

Participant disclosures highlight this intentional shift toward domestic and pedagogical alignment:

"I chose to remain in my teaching position. This decision allowed me to maintain emotional presence at home while continuing meaningful engagement with my learners. I found fulfillment in classroom teaching, mentoring students, and contributing to the school community without sacrificing personal stability."

P3

"Promotion is not just a title change... it often means more administrative expectations, more after-hours responsibilities, more meetings, and more emotional labor... I ask, 'What will this role require me to give up?' And many times, the answer is time, rest, and relational presence."

P5

"I realized that my fulfillment didn't lie in a title, but in the stability of continuity. The ability to teach, mentor, and make a real impact day after day. I chose to stay."

P1

Theme 3: Self-Preservation and Extrinsic Decoupling

The final theme, Self-Preservation and Extrinsic Decoupling, maps out the objective structural matrix—specifically plantilla starvation and an administrative stranglehold—that keeps educators stationary, proving that career stagnation is an institutional reality rather than a lack of individual effort or ambition. Confronted with a severe lack of funded higher-tier items and an overwhelming clerical workload, educators strategically decouple their self-worth and professional identity from external organizational rewards, embracing career plateauing as an intentional act of self-preservation.

Even when a rank advancement (such as promotion to Teacher III) was achieved, it exposed a it exposed an operational trap a minimal financial increment accompanied by a disproportionate increase in administrative duties. The operational framework effectively leverages advanced teaching titles to absorb non-teaching workloads, burying dependable educators under endless documentation distributed by department heads. This clerical burden consumes the exact time and energy required to advocate for further progression, causing the emotional center of gravity to shift from generative teaching to defensive administrative compliance.

Participant disclosures highlight the structural lack of funded promotional items (*plantilla starvation*):

"In our SHS department, there were no available plantilla positions or clear opportunities for promotion. Knowing that, I felt like I had little choice but to remain where I was."

P4

"One of the factors gid nga maka-affect sa amon is the available item gid or vacancy sa Senior High School... qualified kami, pwede kami ma-promote, but the power lies with the administration."

P6

Other participants detailed how the administrative burden forces a strategy of extrinsic decoupling to preserve personal mental health:

"It is a blessing because of that 1,500 pesos additional to your salary... But these 1,500 pesos honestly speaking, cannot compensate the additional workloads given to you by your department head."

P1

"The classroom is still full of students, but the emotional center of gravity has shifted—from teaching to documenting that teaching happened."

P2

CONCLUSIONS

This section brings together the core insights drawn from the lived stories of mid-career public Junior and Senior high school teachers navigating long-term rank stagnation in the Schools Division of Negros Occidental. Following Clark Moustakas's framework for transcendental phenomenology, these insights balance the everyday, personal moments of finding purpose inside the classroom (the textural dimension) with the institutional barriers and home realities that influence those moments (the structural dimension). The conclusions below directly address the study's three main research questions, coming together to reveal the core essence of what it truly means for these educators to choose classroom stability over moving up the administrative ladder.

1. In response to the first sub-question regarding the daily realities, emotional landscapes, and vocational perceptions of mid-career educators, the lived experience of remaining in the classroom amidst long-term rank stagnation is defined by a shift from defensive cynicism to purposeful sanctuary.

After spending a full decade frozen at a single rank despite strong performance ratings and over ten years of service, these teachers initially carried the heavy emotional weight of watching peers move ahead through unclear channels. To protect their mental well-being against a system that felt indifferent to their hard work, they developed a protective shield of cynicism. Over time, however, their daily reality transformed. Instead of viewing the classroom as a place of delayed progress, they intentionally turned it into a refuge. By pulling their emotional energy away from division bureaucracy, they re-anchored their purpose in the immediate, genuine joy of watching their students learn and grow—choosing classroom continuity to protect their peace and daily fulfillment.

2. In response to the second sub-question regarding how systemic environments and personal lives shape internal consciousness, the decision to prioritize classroom stability over administrative advancement is driven by the interaction between heavy administrative burdens, plantilla starvation, and a conscious shift toward home life.

Structurally, career stagnation is driven by clear institutional barriers: a severe shortage of funded promotion slots (plantilla starvation) and an overwhelming volume of non-teaching clerical work. Teachers psychologically process small career milestones—such as reaching Teacher III—not as true progress, but as a frustrating trap that offers minor salary increases in exchange for an avalanche of extra paperwork from department heads. At the same time, family dynamics play a crucial role in their decision-making. Realizing that moving into higher administrative ranks brings exhausting stress that can strain home life, teachers set firm boundaries around vertical mobility. They process staying in the classroom not as an institutional failure, but as a healthy, rational choice to protect their personal health, family stability, and daily peace of mind.

3. Synthesizing the textural experiences and structural realities into a single core essence reveals that the lived meaning of choosing vocational stability over institutional advancement is reclaiming professional agency through intentional boundaries. At its heart, remaining in classroom roles amidst systemic stagnation is an empowering act of self-preservation within a rigid public school ecosystem. When faced with structural barriers, administrative overload, and scarce promotion slots, these educators take back control by redefining

what success means to them. They stop waiting for the system to validate their worth through higher ranks and instead cultivate deep, self-determined fulfillment within their classrooms and homes. Ultimately, their shared experience shows that staying in the classroom is not about giving up—it is an active, meaningful choice to align daily work with personal peace, family well-being, and a genuine commitment to student learning.

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