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## Career Stagnancy: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Unpromoted Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

Many teachers in the Philippine public education system remain unpromoted for extended periods despite established promotion policies, yet little is known about how they address and interpret this protracted career stagnation. This study sought to understand the essence of career stagnation as influenced by structural, emotional, and personal factors by investigating the lived experiences of unpromoted public school teachers. A qualitative phenomenological design was used, guided by Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology. Nine (9) Teacher I participants from Koronadal National Comprehensive High School, a sizable public secondary school in Region XII, the Philippines, were chosen using purposeful sampling. The data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and processed utilizing horizontalization, phenomenological reduction, textural and structural description synthesis, and grouping of key statements. The results revealed eight interrelated themes: identity creation beyond rank, coping and resilience, emotional and psychological strain, personal and familial restrictions, structural and bureaucratic barriers to advancement, and enduring hope for the future. The experience's main takeaway was that career stagnation is a complex, emotionally charged, and meaning-driven phenomenon that is formed by unfair systems and a persistent dedication to teaching rather than just a procedural delay. The study concludes that teachers' emotional health, family relationships, professional identity, and long-term goals are all significantly impacted by extended non-promotion. These results highlight the need for stronger psychosocial support systems and more compassionate, open, and equitable promotion procedures to maintain teachers' dignity and the caliber of education.

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a fundamental vocation that supports social cohesion, nation-building, and the development of human capital. In addition to imparting knowledge, educators also foster unity and the development of human capital. Teachers influence students' values, identities, and life paths in addition to imparting knowledge. Magna Carta for Public School Teachers (Republic Act 4670) institutionalizes this function in the Philippine public education system, and the Department of Education and the Civil Service Commission oversee the institutionalized promotion procedures that govern career advancement. These are meant to recognize achievement throughout the careers of the teachers, sustain motivation, and encourage professional growth. Many teachers, particularly those who remain in entry-level positions, do not earn promotions for prolonged periods of time. This circumstance, often referred to as career stagnancy, is a complex lived experience marked by ongoing professional identity negotiation, emotional pressure, and repetitive application cycles. It goes beyond simply being a procedural delay.

Long-term non-promotion among teachers is linked to psychological stress, decreased motivation, and weaker professional commitment, according to recent research by Day and Gu (2019). According to Nguyen *et al.* (2021), professional stagnation has also been connected

to financial instability and strained family relationships, particularly in public-sector settings where progress is strongly correlated with economic stability. Even highly dedicated professionals may experience emotional tiredness, decreased job satisfaction, and identity conflict as a result of career plateauing and limited mobility, according to Karavardar (2019) and Jung *et al.* (2022). In the Philippine context, recent policy-focused research highlights systemic constraints such as limited plantilla items, bureaucratic promotion requirements, and unequal access to professional development opportunities, particularly in large public schools with limited funding (Manasan, 2020; David *et al.*, 2023).

Despite these developments, most previous research has examined teacher stagnation from an administrative, motivational, or policy standpoint, occasionally employing survey-based or outcome-focused methodologies. Thus, the lived experiences of unpromoted teachers—their emotional realities, meaning-making processes, and identity negotiations—remain neglected, particularly in the Philippine public school system.

A phenomenological approach is considered suitable for this study. This research is grounded in the conscious experience of the participants and is guided by Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology. Rather, the merely describing the lived experience, the study seeks to arrive at the essence of career stagnancy through

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systematic phenomenological processes. This engaging in epoché or bracketing, the researcher intentionally suspends presuppositions to allow the phenomenon to be examined as it presents itself in the consciousness of the participants. Through phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning, the study moves beyond surface description to reveal the essential structures that constitute the lived experiences of prolonged and non-promotion among public school teachers. The framework is guided by Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology. By situating the study within national education policies and Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, the research seeks to provide insights relevant for responsive promotion and support systems. The study aims to clarify factors underlying non-promotion and contribute to understanding issues that affect teachers' motivation and educational quality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Phenomenological Foundations

The lived experience and its subjective meaning is prioritized by phenomenology. Foundational thinkers include Heidegger (1962), who shifted attention to "being in the world" and interpretive understanding; Husserl (1962), who emphasized returning "to the things themselves" through epoché and description; van Manen (1990), who operationalized hermeneutic phenomenology for education research; and Clark Moustakas (1994), who described phenomenology and transcendental procedures for structural and textural synthesis, horizontalization and epoché. Contemporary methodological guides of Giorgi (2009) from providing rigor and significant statements in deriving essences.

This phenomenology study is appropriate as it privileges subjective meanings of stagnancy of teachers rather than focusing on outcomes or objective predictors.

### Theoretical Framework

The Transcendental Phenomenology by Moustakas' (1994) is primarily grounded by this study that provides the philosophical and methodological foundation for in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of unpromoted teachers. Transcendental phenomenology stress that the exploration of conscious experience as perceived by participants, aiming to reveal the true essence of a phenomenon through disciplined reflection. Central to this approach are bracketing or epoché, where the researcher sets aside personal horizontalization, assumptions; which treats with equal value all participants' statements; and the synthesis of textural descriptions of structural description on how the experience occur and what participants lived experience. Through this process, the study captures the authentic meaning of career stagnancy among teachers without imposing causal assumptions or external interpretations.

To contextualized and support the phenomenological analysis, the study draws on Herzberg's (1959)

Motivation–Hygiene Theory and Bardwick's (1986) Career Plateau Theory as sensitizing theoretical lenses. Career Plateau Theory emphasizes the experience in one's professional role of feeling "stuck" due to blocked advancement, despite long years of services which resonates with teachers who remain unpromoted. Herzberg's theory further explains how the absence of motivators such as professional growth, advancement, and recognition, alongside hygiene concerns such as working conditions and salary shapes teachers' work motivation and emotional responses. These theories do not function as predictors or variables but serve to deepen the participants' interpretation of narratives after themes have emerged.

These allow the study to examine career stagnancy in a theoretical perspective as structurally influenced experience, emotionally embedded, and meaning-laden lived experience. Teachers' lived realities are understood as shaped by personal circumstances like educational background, systemic constraints including bureaucratic processes and limited promotion plantilla items, and organizational contexts such as mentoring practices and recognition. By anchoring the inquiry in transcendental phenomenology and supported by relevant career and motivational theories, the study seeks to generate participants insights that can inform more responsive, equitable and humane policies addressing teachers career stagnancy.

### Related Literature

Globally, research shows that workers who remain too long in entry-level positions often experience declining motivation, stress, and professional dissatisfaction. In the Philippine context, most research studies on teachers highlight burnout, job satisfaction, and workload, but very few focus specifically on the problem of stagnancy. In Mindanao, particularly in Region 12, systemic barriers such as strict bureaucratic requirements and limited slots for promotion remain common concerns. While policies such as various DepEd Orders and the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers provide promotion guidelines, these do not fully capture the lived realities of teachers who stay unpromoted. This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological study that will give teachers the opportunity to share their experiences directly.

The study "Career Stagnancy: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Unpromoted Teachers" is anchored on Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology, which concentrates on understanding the essence of lived experiences. Moustakas emphasizes epoché or bracketing, where the researcher sets aside personal assumptions to truly listen to participants' voices. Through horizontalization and the identification of significant statements, these experiences are clustered into themes to reveal both textural (what was experienced) and structural (how it was experienced) meanings. This approach fits the present study, as it seeks to uncover the genuine realities of teachers who remain unpromoted despite years of

service. Complementing this philosophical foundation are Bardwick's (1986) Career Plateau Theory and Herzberg's (1959) Motivation-Hygiene Theory, which distinguishes between motivators such as recognition and growth, and hygiene factors such as pay and conditions. These frameworks together provide a holistic lens for exploring how career stagnancy influences teachers' professional identity, motivation, and sense of fulfillment.

Globally, the issue of career stagnancy among educators is widely documented. Feldman and Weitz (1988) and Burke (2015) both observed that employees who remain in entry-level positions for extended periods experience a decline in motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction. Ingersoll (2012) noted that limited career growth is a major factor in teacher attrition, while Day and Gu (2014) emphasized that career progression plays a vital role in sustaining teacher resilience and performance. More recent research, such as Wang (2024), found that Chinese kindergarten teachers experience "career plateauing" when promotions are delayed, leading to emotional exhaustion and feelings of reduced self-worth. Similarly, Ghamrawi and Abu-Tineh (2023) described the teaching profession as "a flat career," highlighting the absence of clear advancement pathways in many education systems. These findings demonstrate that teacher stagnancy is not only an organizational issue but also a psychological and emotional one that affects professional identity and morale.

In the Philippine context, several studies have explored teacher career progression and its challenges. Pagayanan (2021) examined teachers in Tacloban City and found that bureaucratic processes and limited plantilla positions hinder promotion. Jaminal (2025) revealed that teachers in Misamis Oriental face multiple barriers such as lack of graduate studies and limited administrative support. Simbre et al (2023) discussed how school heads play a crucial role in facilitating or delaying promotions, emphasizing the importance of transparent leadership. Bernardo *et al.* (2020) focused on teachers' attitudes toward continuing professional development, noting that high workloads and policy demands often discourage further training, which in turn affects promotion eligibility. Similarly, Maligalig and Albert (2018) found that public school teachers perceive promotion as both necessary for recognition and difficult to attain due to rigid requirements. These national studies underline that professional growth in the Philippines is often slowed by systemic issues such as bureaucratic procedures, lack of access to higher education, and uneven support from leadership. Cabahug *et al.*, (2024) on the other hand, highlighted that phenomenological approaches have been effectively applied in similar educational contexts to capture how educators experience and interpret professional demands alongside personal commitments. Their studies on instructors navigating graduate degree requirements reveal that teachers' lived narratives often underscore the emotional and cognitive challenges of balancing career expectations with institutional demands.

This reinforces the appropriateness of phenomenology to surface rich, meaning-laden accounts of teachers who remain unpromoted, highlighting how professional identity and lived experience intersect.

At the local level, particularly in Mindanao and Region 12, similar patterns emerge. Alvarez (2020) found that teachers in South Cotabato remain unpromoted for many years due to the limited number of available promotion slots. Navarro (2021) highlighted that teacher in Region 12 face bureaucratic delays that make the process highly competitive, discouraging many from applying. Santos (2019) observed that stagnancy affects teacher morale but also builds resilience and solidarity among peers, while Villanueva (2018) noted that the absence of mentoring and coaching programs contributes to teachers' inability to progress. Despite the challenges, Reyes (2022) found that many teachers draw strength from their students and families, using these relationships to sustain their motivation even without promotion. Nerona & Narido (2025) indicates that that limited access to professional development and research engagement remains a significant barrier for teachers' growth and recognition. For instance, public school teachers often experience inadequate support in research capabilities, which in turn affects their confidence to engage in professional advancement activities that are increasingly tied to promotion criteria. This aligns with participants in the current study who reported that complex documentation, training requirements, and constrained opportunities for meaningful professional development contributed to prolonged stagnancy, reflecting how systemic barriers fragment teachers' career progression and morale.

The literature collectively reveals a consistent theme: career stagnancy is both a structural and emotional experience. Globally, teachers who remain at the same rank for long periods often experience frustration, disengagement, and a sense of professional invisibility. In the Philippines, systemic barriers such as limited plantilla items, bureaucratic promotion procedures, and unequal access to professional development worsen the issue. Locally, these challenges are amplified by resource limitations and geographic isolation. Yet, what remains missing in the body of research is a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and personal meanings behind these teachers' stagnancy. Most studies describe the situation statistically or administratively, but few give unpromoted teachers the opportunity to tell their own stories. Hence, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring their experiences through Moustakas' phenomenological lens, uncovering how they perceive, endure, and make sense of their prolonged lack of promotion.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design grounded in Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology, which builds upon Husserlian philosophy. The design

was selected not to merely describe the participants' lived experiences, but to uncover the essence of career stagnancy as consciously experienced by underpromoted public school teachers. Central to this approach is the practice of epoché or bracketing, wherein the researcher suspends personal assumptions and prior knowledge to engage with participants' accounts with openness. Through phenomenological reduction, experiences are examined in their purity, while imaginative variation is employed to explore the structural conditions that shape how the phenomenon is experienced. The integration of these processes allows for the synthesis of essences and meanings, thereby moving beyond descriptive accounts toward a transcendental understanding of phenomenon. Phenomenology is appropriate as the study does not seek to generate theory or interpret meaning through the researcher's lens, but rather to describe the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by participants while suspending researcher presuppositions through epoché or bracketing.

Consistent with Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology, the study does not aim to merely describe lived experiences but to reveal the invariant structures and essences that define the phenomenon.

### Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants of the study were unpromoted public secondary school teachers currently holding the position of Teacher I. Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) had served in the public education system for a prolonged period (at least five years), and (2) had experienced at least one attempt or consideration for promotion. Teachers who had already been promoted or were holding administrative positions were excluded.

A total of nine (9) participants were selected, which is within the recommended range of 6-15 participants for phenomenological studies. Purposive criterion sampling was employed to ensure that all participants had direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon. The study was conducted at Koronadal National Comprehensive High School, one of the largest public secondary schools in Region XII, Philippines.

### Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, designed to elicit rich, in-depth narratives related to participants' experiences of career stagnancy. The interview questions were informed by existing literature on career plateau, teacher motivation, and phenomenological inquiry. Probing questions were used to clarify and encourage deeper reflection.

To enhance credibility and content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in qualitative research and educational leadership. While pilot testing was not conducted - consistent with phenomenological research - the flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed questions to be refined during interviews based on

participants' responses. Supplementary data sources included field notes and a researcher's reflective journal, which documented contextual observations and reflexive insights throughout the research process.

### Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the Sultan Kudarat State University Graduate School, the Schools Division Superintendent, and the School Principal. Written informed consent was secured from all participants. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting within the school to ensure confidentiality and openness. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken immediately after each interview to capture non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual details. All digital files were stored in password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

### Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenological method which involved: horizontalization, treating all statements with equal value, identification of significant statements related to career stagnancy, formulation of meaning units, clustering of meaning into themes, develop rich textual descriptions on how the experiences occurred. Subsequently, imaginative variation was applied to examine the possible structural conditions and contexts that influenced how the phenomenon was experienced, leading to the development of structural descriptions. Finally, the synthesis of textural and structural descriptions enabled the articulation of the essence of career stagnancy as a transcendental phenomenon, reflecting both the meanings and underlying structures of participants' lived experiences.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Given the sensitive nature of career experiences, participants' dignity, emotional well-being, and professional integrity were prioritized throughout the research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of the Unpromoted Teachers

This phenomenological inquiry foregrounds the lived realities of unpromoted public secondary school teachers and examines how prolonged career stagnancy is experienced, interpreted, and sustained over time. The participants comprised nine (9) Teacher I faculty members

from Koronadal National Comprehensive High School, including six females and three males, who had remained in the same rank for periods ranging from nine to twenty-three years. Several participants were already nearing retirement, illustrating that non-promotion is not confined to early career stages but persists across the professional life course. Interviews conducted in English and Filipino enabled participants to articulate nuanced emotional and professional narratives, revealing experiences of waiting, quiet endurance, adaptive resilience, and redefined notions of success. The demographic profile situates career stagnancy as a long-term, relational, and meaning-laden condition embedded within institutional structures rather than a temporary administrative delay. Grounded in these shared professional contexts, the analysis that follows presents the emergent themes derived from participants' narratives.

### **Systemic Barriers and Bureaucratic Obstacles to Promotion**

Unpromoted teachers described their professional journey as shaped by rigid, shifting, and often opaque promotion systems that created sustained uncertainty and emotional fatigue. Most participants narrated repeated cycles of application characterized by extensive documentation, reliance on administrative endorsement, limited plantilla items, and continuously changing requirements under the Expanded Career Progression (ECP) framework. Rather than experiencing promotion as a predictable pathway, teachers perceived it as an unstable process that demanded constant adjustment and prolonged waiting. This uncertainty generated frustration, discouragement, and a growing sense of professional invisibility, particularly among those who identified themselves as quiet, compliant, and task-focused educators. One participant expressed the emotional weight of this experience, stating, "I prepared everything they asked for, but every year there is a new requirement. It feels like the system keeps changing, and I am always catching up. (P1). Another highlighted the perceived political nature of advancement: "Sometimes it's not about how well you teach, but who notices you. If you are quiet and just do your work, you are easily forgotten" (P7). These accounts reflect a shared perception that promotion is not solely merit-based but is mediated by visibility, influence, and access to institutional networks. These findings resonate with Bardwick's (1986) Career Plateau Theory, which explains how blocked advancement fosters feelings of professional arrest, stagnation, and diminishing agency. Similarly, organizational justice and workplace politics literature suggests that perceived inequities in promotion systems negatively shape employees' motivation and outlook Adams, 1965; Hoy and Miskel, 2013. From a phenomenological standpoint, the teachers' narratives constitute the textural dimension of career stagnancy - what they repeatedly live through - while the structural dimension reveals how these experiences unfolded within bureaucratic systems marked by limited opportunities,

political mediation, and institutional inequities. In addition, Nerona & Narido (2025) indicates that limited access to professional development and research engagement remains a significant barrier for teachers' growth and recognition. Public school teachers often experience inadequate support in research capabilities, which in turn affects their confidence to engage in professional advancement activities that are increasingly tied to promotion criteria. This aligns with participants in the current study who reported that complex documentation, training requirements, and constrained opportunities for meaningful professional development contributed to prolonged stagnancy, reflecting how systemic barriers fragment teachers' career progression and morale.

### **Emotional and Psychological Burden of Career Stagnancy**

Emotional experience deeply emerged in career stagnancy. Teachers' participants expressed their feelings of emotional heaviness, exhaustion, self-doubt, shame, and frustration during ranking seasons. Many internalized stagnancies are perceived as personal inadequacies despite emerging deeply as an emotional experience. Participants expressed feelings of frustration, shame, self-doubt, exhaustion, and emotional heaviness, especially during ranking seasons. Many internalized stagnancies as personal inadequacy despite consistently satisfactory or outstanding performance. One of the participants shared, "Every ranking season, I feel heavy inside. I don't want to hope too much because disappointments hurt more. (P9). Another revealed the silent emotional toll of social comparison: "When people get promoted, and people ask me why I'm still Teacher I, I smile - but deep inside, I feel small" (P8). These statements demonstrate how stagnancy is silently endured and emotionally internalized. This is anchored to the concepts of emotional labor by Hochschild (1983), burnout by Meslach and Leiter (2016), psychological contract breach by Rousseau (1995), and Herzberg's Motivational-Hygiene Theory that resonates strongly with these findings. The absence of motivators such as professional growth, recognition, and advancement usually diminished morale, while hygiene factors like workload and salary stagnation exacerbated emotional strain. Phenomenologically, this theme reflects how stagnancy is lived inwardly, emotional well-being, self-perceptions, and shaping consciousness.

### **Growth, Self-Realization, and Meaning Beyond Promotion**

Beyond emotional acceptance and burden, participants described career stagnation as a context for inner transformation, maturity, and personal growth. While being unpromoted initially led to diminished confidence, discouragement, and frustration, many teachers reported developing emotional discipline, humility, patience, and a deeper understanding of their professional purpose over time. Stagnancy became a crucible through which teachers learned to redefine success through service and endurance,

detach self-worth from rank, and set regular expectations. One participant reflected, “Being unpromoted taught me humility. I learned to serve without expecting anything in return” (P4). Another shared “Stagnancy slowed me down, but it also made me reflect on why I chose this profession in the first place” (P6). These statements show how adversity becomes a site of professional and personal growth. This theme reflects how the meaning evolves over time. Teachers’ consciousness shifted to reflection from resistance, revealing that stagnancy facilitated inner growth, even through pain. This narrative resonates with Bardwick’s Career Plateau Theory, which acknowledges that plateauing can result not only in decline but also in redirections and reassessments of values. It also complements Herzberg’s Motivation Hygiene Theory, as teachers cultivated intrinsic motivations, such as moral purpose and personal fulfillment, despite the absence of extrinsic rewards.

#### **Personal and Life Circumstance Limiting Advancement**

Teachers’ participants situated their experiences of stagnancy within broader life contexts, including interrupted educational pathways, financial limitations, health concerns, and family caregiving responsibilities. Some teachers described prioritizing caregiving and family survival over training requirements or graduate studies, while others narrated how calamities disrupted career continuity or overseas employment. One of the participants explained, “There was a time I had to choose between attending a seminar and buying food for my children. Promotion became a luxury I could not afford” (P5). Another stressed “Marriage, health issues, and family responsibilities slowly pushed my career plans aside. By the time I looked back, many years had already passed” (P2). These findings show how lived realities of unpromoted teachers intersect with institutional demands, shaping stagnancy beyond individual control. This theme is anchored to the concepts of Greenhaus & Allen (2011) Work-life Balance Theory, Role Conflict by Kahn *et al.* (1964), and Family-to-work interference by Frone *et al.* (1992), which indicates that the structural description of experience on how stagnancy occurs through the interaction of personal realities and institutional demands. The findings assert that stagnancy in careers is also shaped by lived circumstances and not solely system-driven, reinforcing that experience is always contextually embedded.

#### **Family and Social Impact of Career Stagnancy**

Participants stress that stagnancy extended beyond the workplace into the home. Families endured financial constraints due to stagnant salary grades, spouses absorbed emotional frustrations, and children questioned their parents’ lack of promotion. Teachers often expressed their guilt toward families, revealing how stagnancy becomes a shared relational and emotional experience. One of the participants shared, “My children ask me why I’m still Teacher I. I don’t know how to explain it without

feeling guilty” (P7). Other participants stated, “My wife carries the frustration with me. She never blames me, but I know she worries about our future” (P9). These excerpts highlight how stagnancy extends into shared emotional spaces and family life. These findings directly address the study’s problem statement, which highlights the lack of attention to the social and emotional meanings attached to stagnancy. The results demonstrate that career stagnancy is a relational phenomenon, affecting not only teachers’ professional identities but also dynamics and social standing.

#### **Teacher Identity Rooted in Service Rather than Rank**

Participants consistently anchored their professional identity in teaching itself rather than in salary grade or rank, despite prolonged stagnancy. Many described fulfillments derived from being remembered for dedication and compassion, mentoring younger teachers, and the success of the former student. One of the participants stated, “Even if I am not promoted, when my students come back and thank me, I feel that I have achieved something greater” (P6). In addition, other participants emphasized “Rank does not define me as a teacher. My legacy is in the lives I helped shape” (P3). These narratives show how teachers detach professional worth from formal rank and re-anchor it in service. This theme is anchored to the concepts of Day & Gu (2007), the Teacher Professional Identity, Meaning making in Teaching by Palmer (1998), and Intrinsic Motivation by Deci & Ryan (2000), which reflects a critical phenomenological insight that teachers actively reconstruct self-worth beyond validation. This challenge purely administrative understanding of career success and supports Herzberg’s assertion that intrinsic motivators such as achievement, purpose, and meaning remain powerful even when advancement or promotion is absent. Cabahug *et al.* (2024) highlights that in their studies on instructors navigating graduate degree requirements reveal that teachers’ lived narratives often underscore the emotional and cognitive challenges of balancing career expectations with institutional demands. This reinforces the appropriateness of phenomenology to surface rich, meaning-laden accounts of teachers who remain unpromoted, highlighting how professional identity and lived experience intersect

#### **Coping Mechanisms, Acceptance, and Resilient Hope**

Participants described coping through renewed focus on classroom practice, emotional withdrawal from promotional cycles, reframing, faith, and acceptance. While some unpromoted teachers expressed diminished expectations for promotion, they retained hope rooted in moral commitment, dignity, and service, rather than institutional rewards. One participant reflected, “I learned to accept that maybe promotion is not for me now. Acceptance gave me peace” (P2). Another participant expressed, “I stopped expecting too much, I focused instead on teaching and trusting God with the rest” (P1). These narratives reflect a psychological coping strategy

of acceptance rather than resignation. This is anchored to the concepts of Master (2001), the Resilience Theory, and Coping Strategies by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which emphasizes quiet perseverance in teaching. In the lens of transcendental phenomenology, acceptance emerged as a strategy of meaning-making, allowing unpromoted teachers to survive emotionally within an unresolved professional condition. This reflects the essence of the experience as a paradox of faith and fatigue, dedication, and disappointment.

### Future Orientation and Continuing Hope Despite Stagnancy

Despite repeated rejections and prolonged stagnancy, participants consistently articulated a future-oriented perspective grounded in hope, faith, and continued service. While expectations for promotion became tempered, teachers were grounded in hope, faith, and continued service. While expectations for promotion became tempered, teachers expressed aspirations to complete graduate studies, mentor younger educators, retire with dignity, or still apply for promotion “if given the chance”. Importantly, hope was no longer anchored solely in rank but in being remembered as a committed and compassionate teacher. One of the participants shared, “I still believe that if promotion comes, it will come at the right time. If not, I will still teach with my whole heart” (P7). Another stated, “I may retire as Teacher I, but I want to be remembered as a teacher who truly cared “ (P8). These narratives demonstrate hope reframed beyond institutional reward and anchored in purpose. This is future self-theories, anchored to the concepts of Snyder (2002), the Hope Theory and Possible Selves Theory by Markus & Nurius (1986) that illustrates how the unpromoted teachers negotiate uncertainty by future reframing, sustaining optimism without denying present realities. In phenomenological terms, this reflects intentionality that, despite systemic constraints, the teachers’ orientation toward the future remains intact. Herzberg’s Theory further explains this phenomenon, as intrinsic motivators such as contribution, purpose, and meaning continue to drive engagement even when hygiene factors remain unmet.

### CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative research enhances the understanding of career standstill by illustrating that extended periods without advancement for educators in public schools aren’t just an administrative issue. Instead, it’s a lived reality that is structurally created, emotionally felt, and driven by personal meaning. Utilizing Moustakas’ Transcendental Phenomenology, along with Career Plateau Theory and Motivation-Hygiene Theory, the discoveries indicate that promotion frameworks focusing on paperwork presence and restricted availability of positions, unintentionally disadvantage dedicated educators. These teachers demonstrate their professional significance through consistent dedication to their classrooms instead of

prioritizing tactical career progression. Consequently, career standstill materializes as a collective journey influenced by organizational barriers, individual life situations, and unjust institutional frameworks.

Although motivational factors from the institution are weakened and there’s continuous emotional pressure, educators positively rebuild their professional identity. They anchor their self-worth in ethical goals, commitment to students, and the effects of relationships. This method of creating meaning transforms a standstill into a complex area characterized by both fragility and strength, expanding its influence beyond the work environment to affect family relationships, monetary security, and ambitions for the future. These findings broaden current theories on motivation and careers by situating them within real-life experiences, emphasizing standstill as an occurrence that shapes relationships and identity, rather than merely a straightforward result of one’s career.

This research has substantial consequences for both educational policy and leadership, highlighting the necessity for promotion procedures that are open, adaptable to circumstances, and considerate, which aligns with SDG 4: Quality Education. Institutional acknowledgment, guidance, and emotional assistance are crucial in preserving educator drive and commitment when facing structural obstacles. Further investigation could delve into extended and comparative qualitative narratives across different geographical areas, career phases, and lived experiences as a man or woman, or examine how career standstill connects with keeping educators in their roles and ensuring high-quality education. In the end, addressing career stability is a matter of valuing professional respect and sustaining education, as it acknowledges that teachers who are not promoted are still crucial to the ethical and instructional underpinning of public education.

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