

Beyond the Salary Gap: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Affective Commitment of Long-Service Teachers in a Private Catholic Institution

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.110400164>

Received: 22 April 2026; Accepted: 27 April 2026; Published: 16 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of seasoned teachers with over 10 years of service at Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc., a private Catholic-Riverian institution in Davao City, Philippines. The purpose was to understand the factors sustaining their long-term commitment amid the public-private salary gap and systemic challenges in private education. Guided by a phenomenological narrative inquiry, the research addressed four key questions: reasons for staying, challenges faced, benefits gained, and advice for novice teachers. Data were collected through Google Forms with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews from 5–10 purposively sampled participants, analyzed via thematic analysis and interpreted through Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory. Key themes emerged: interpersonal connectivity and institutional belongingness as primary motivators, with colleagues described as “family” fostering affective commitment; intrinsic fulfillment from student growth, professional mastery, and alignment with the school’s Catholic-Riverian values; and benefits such as spiritual maturity, curriculum familiarity, and resilience. In contrast, hygiene factors—financial constraints, heavy workloads, accreditation pressures, and student behavior—were identified as sources of dissatisfaction, reflecting systemic challenges in private schooling. Despite these hurdles, teachers remained because motivators outweighed hygiene deficiencies, transforming teaching into a vocation rather than a mere occupation. The study concludes that teacher retention in private Catholic schools is sustained less by material incentives and more by relationships, values, and shared identity that anchor educators in their institutions. While these findings provide valuable insights for cultivating supportive cultures, reducing administrative burdens, and enhancing faith-based support, they are context-specific to one institution and a small participant pool. Future research should expand to diverse private school contexts to test whether similar motivator–hygiene dynamics hold true across sectarian and non-sectarian institutions.

Keywords: teacher retention, private Catholic schools, phenomenological inquiry, affective commitment, institutional belongingness, faith-based values, Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory

INTRODUCTION

The education system in the Philippines is a complex framework comprising both public and private institutions, where each plays a vital role in delivering quality education to students across the nation. Within this framework, private institutions serve as a vital pillar where the unwavering dedication of educators directly impacts the caliber of learning and the overall performance of the school. Teachers are widely recognized as the most valuable resource in the education sector, and the commitment is closely linked to teaching quality and institutional success. Their loyalty and long-term service are essential to ensure stable instruction and continuous improvement. According to Burmansah et al. (2019), teachers who experience contentment and fulfillment are more inclined to remain committed to their educational endeavors. This reveals that teachers tend to remain and extend their service in an institution which are primarily motivated by a strong sense of belonging, the cultivation of “family-like” relationships with colleagues, and the fulfillment derived from witnessing the growth of their students. For these educators, the school environment serves as a platform for continuous professional and personal development, where familiarity with institutional culture provides a sense of security and stability.

However, this dedication exists alongside significant systemic gaps. The struggle to balance professional fulfillment with economic survival is a central problem in private school settings. While seasoned teachers find “personal growth” and “spiritual deepening” in their roles, they simultaneously navigate the fear of going out to find a new job due to potential salary decreases or the loss of proximity-based convenience.

Current research both locally and internationally supports these findings, highlighting the tension between vocation and economic reality. De Vera et al. (2022) examined the persistent “salary gap” in the Philippine basic education system, noting that while private schools offer professional autonomy, the financial lure of public service remains the primary driver for teacher migration. Internationally, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) emphasized that teacher well-being and the intent to stay are heavily influenced by “supportive leadership” and “social belonging,” while Toropova et al. (2021) found that while workload is a universal stressor, the “school working conditions,” including administrative support and teacher cooperation, are more significant predictors of job satisfaction than salary alone. These studies collectively suggest that while intrinsic motivation is high, the gap in financial compensation, job security, and workloads remains a major hurdle for the sustainability of the private education sector.

Research Questions

This study explored the lived experiences of the seasoned teachers or long-service teachers in a private institution focusing on their reasons/motivation, challenges, benefits gained, and advices to novice teachers. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons that motivates you to remain in the same private school for a long period?
2. What are the challenges you experience serving in a private school?
3. What are the benefits that you gained in staying in the private school?
4. What advice can you give to new teachers entering the private school system?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design specifically employing a phenomenological narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences and career trajectories of seasoned educators. This approach is highly appropriate for the current study as it allows for a deep exploration of the affective commitment and personal motivations that drive teachers to remain in a private institution for extended periods. Phenomenological inquiry facilitates a nuanced understanding of how these teachers navigate the tension between vocation and economic reality within the Philippine educational context. Ultimately, this design provided the necessary framework to gather rich, descriptive data that can be synthesized into valuable advice for novice teachers.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc., a prominent “Riverian” private school situated in Calinan, Davao City. As the largest private educational institution in the area, it served as a critical hub for academic development and community engagement within the region. The selection of this specific locale was justified by its long-standing history and its capacity to maintain a significant number of seasoned educators who had witnessed the school’s evolution. This setting provided a rich environment to examine how school working conditions and administrative support influenced teacher retention in a private school. By focusing on this institution, the research gained access to a concentrated pool of participants who embodied the loyalty and long-term service essential for institutional improvement.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study include 5 to 10 seasoned or long-service teachers who have been dedicated to Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc. for at least 10 years or more. This specific group is chosen through purposive sampling to ensure that the participants possess the depth of experience required to provide meaningful insights into the resilience and commitment of private school educators. The rationale for selecting these participants is their unique ability to articulate the reasons behind their affective commitment and their survival amidst the systemic gaps identified in the private education sector.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure commenced with the formal process of securing permissions from the administrative office of Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc., ensuring that the study complied with institutional protocols. Once approval was granted, the researchers identified and contacted potential participants who satisfied the criterion of having at least ten years of service.

The primary instrument for data collection was Google Forms, which was distributed to the participants to provide a structured yet flexible platform for sharing their narratives. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they retained the right to withdraw at any time without adverse consequences. To ensure the integrity of the data, the Google Form contained open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive descriptions of participants' experiences. The researchers safeguarded all responses by storing them securely and restricting their use exclusively to the stated academic purposes. This procedure was deliberately designed to align with the study's objective of documenting valuable insights that could contribute to strategies for improving teacher retention.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and Google Forms were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the participants' narratives. This process began with the familiarization stage, during which the researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the lived experiences of the seasoned teachers. Following this, initial codes were generated to label specific segments of data related to the study's core objectives, such as reasons for staying, challenges faced, and benefits gained. These codes were then collated into potential themes that defined the institutional culture at Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc.

To deepen interpretation, the themes were further examined through the lens of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. This framework allowed the researchers to distinguish between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, workload, working conditions) that, when inadequate, cause dissatisfaction, and motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition, responsibility, and the meaningfulness of the work itself) that drive satisfaction and long-term commitment. By mapping the participants' narratives onto these categories, the analysis clarified why teachers remain despite systemic challenges: motivators such as interpersonal connectivity, spiritual growth, and professional mastery outweighed deficiencies in hygiene factors like compensation and administrative burdens.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical protocols to ensure the protection of participants. Prior to participation, respondents were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the voluntary nature of involvement and the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained electronically through Messenger, where participants confirmed their willingness to take part after reviewing the information sheet.

To safeguard confidentiality, all identifying details were removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned to participants. No personal identifiers were included in reports or publications, ensuring that participants' anonymity was preserved throughout the research process. By explicitly outlining the consent procedures and confidentiality safeguards, this study demonstrates adherence to ethical standards in qualitative research, ensuring that participants' dignity, privacy, and rights were fully respected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons for Remaining in the School

Emerging Theme: Interpersonal Connectivity and Institutional Belongingness

The findings reveal that seasoned teachers remain in the institution primarily because of motivators, as defined by Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. These motivators are intrinsic to the work and directly linked to satisfaction. Teachers consistently described their colleagues as "*family*," highlighting the deep interpersonal connectivity that fosters belongingness. This aligns with Herzberg's motivators of relationships, recognition, and the work itself—factors that generate genuine satisfaction and commitment. For example, P1 emphasized "*good relationship with colleagues, incentives for children, and sense of belonging*," while P2 echoed that "*my colleagues are not just colleagues but family*." Such affective bonds illustrate how interpersonal relationships function as motivators that sustain long-term retention. This sense of belonging is strongly supported by various studies. Alaribe et al. (2025) found that affective commitment—teachers' emotional attachment to their institutions—was a decisive factor in retention, with a very strong positive correlation to job satisfaction. This underscores that teacher retention is sustained less by material incentives and more by the depth of relationships cultivated within the institution.

Beyond relationships, teachers also expressed purpose and fulfillment in their work. P3 shared, "*I feel encouraged every time I see my students grow... it reminds me that what I do truly matters*." This reflects Herzberg's motivators of achievement and personal growth, where the intrinsic rewards of student success and professional mastery outweigh external challenges. Ryan and Deci's (2020) Self-Determination Theory supports this, noting that intrinsic motivators are more effective than financial incentives in sustaining commitment.

The responses of P4, P5, and P6 highlight another dimension of teacher retention that goes beyond interpersonal relationships: *institutional identity and values*. P4 *tied their loyalty to alma mater pride*, explaining that their service was a way of giving back to the institution that shaped them. This reflects how personal history and gratitude can anchor long-term commitment. Meanwhile, P5 emphasized *community and educational benefits for children*, while P6 stressed *Catholic formation and opportunities for growth*. These accounts show that retention is not only about workplace relationships but also about alignment with the school's mission, values, and spiritual identity.

Collectively, the participants' narratives and the supporting literature converge to underscore a critical insight into teacher retention: seasoned teachers stay not because of salary or convenience alone, but because of the relationships, values, and shared identity that make their workplace feel like home. This sense of belonging transforms teaching from a job into a vocation, sustaining educators through challenges and anchoring them in their institutions for decades.

Challenges Experiences in a Private School

Emerging Theme: Navigating Institutional Demands and Economic Constraints

Despite their commitment, seasoned teachers face significant hurdles related to financial stability and heavy workloads. P1 highlighted the primary struggle of limited financial resources and a lower salary compared to public schools, alongside the pressure to meet high academic standards and parent expectations. In private schools, teacher salary is often contingent upon the institution's financial capacity, which is directly tied to student enrollment tuition fees. This is compounded by administrative burdens, as P5 mentioned the "*pressure to meet requirements for accreditation*" and "*multiple workloads*". These factors translate into additional paperwork, compliance tasks, and performance monitoring that compound their already heavy workloads. These challenges are systemic, rooted in the economic model of private schooling. Teachers endure dissatisfaction because hygiene factors are insufficiently addressed, but they remain due to stronger motivators.

From the lens of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, these issues represent hygiene factors—salary, working conditions, and institutional policies. Herzberg argued that hygiene factors do not motivate employees, but when

inadequate, they cause dissatisfaction. In this case, limited pay, heavy workloads, and compliance demands create frustration and stress. These factors translate into additional paperwork, performance monitoring, and institutional pressures that compound teachers' already heavy responsibilities.

These findings are aligned with Philippine studies showing that compensation and heavy workloads are the most frequent cited challenges that lead to teacher turnover in the private sector (David & Napararan, 2024; Saldevia & Pedroso, 2025). Such economic strain is particularly critical as private institutions often struggle to compete with public sector salaries (Sumipo, 2020). These issues occur globally; for example, private teachers in Lesotho report being prone to precarious and unfair compensation and workload (Sepiti, 2025). However, private schools provide competent salary base on the institution's financial capacity aligned with the salary job grade mandated by the Philippine government.

Analytically, these challenges are systemic, rooted in the economic model of private schooling. Teachers endure dissatisfaction because hygiene factors are insufficiently addressed. Yet, they remain in the institution due to stronger motivators (such as belongingness, spiritual growth, and professional mastery), which provide meaning and resilience despite the strain.

Benefits Gained from Staying

Emerging Theme: Achieving Holistic Personal and Professional Fulfillment

Staying in Holy Cross College of Calinan provides teachers with benefits that transcend monetary rewards, specifically in the realms of professional mastery and spiritual maturity. P1 observed that long-term service allows them to gain valuable teaching experience and professional skills through continuous practice. It allows them to be more familiar to school system and curriculum. P3 shared that they have experiences "*continuous personal growth*" and that the work "*fuels my educational motivation*", making them more mature and patient educator. Furthermore, the spiritual dimension is a unique benefit in this context; P4 mentioned a "*deepened spiritual aspect*" while P6 stated that the school's philosophy helped them grow more as a mature Christian. Since the school is a Catholic-Riverian institution, the values and faith became one of the extreme factors of their decisions to stay. They aren't just cultivating the minds of the students to become globally competent individuals but also nurturing their faith.

A study confirms that spirituality is a primary driver for retention, as faith-based values provide teachers with sense of purpose that sustains them (Atun & Avergonzado, 2026). Additionally, spiritual direction has been found to enhance teacher well-being and resilience, providing a reflective space to process professional struggles (Bernadette & Marlene, 2025). This transformation of work into a meaningful calling strengthens resilience in the face of professional challenges (Tjahjadi et al., 2025).

Advice to Novice Teachers

Emerging Theme: Sustaining Commitment through Vocation and Resilience

The collective wisdom of seasoned teachers in a private Catholic-Riverian institution emphasizes that long-term survival in the profession requires a transition from viewing teaching as a job to embracing it as an enduring vocation. It means viewing the classroom/school not just a workplace, but as a space where commitment to the students' growth is part of personal identity and fulfillment. This was clearly shared by P1, who encouraged new teachers to "*remain passionate, patient, and committed*" emphasizing that while challenges exist, the experience is "*meaningful and rewarding*". Be more open to learn from experienced colleagues and be responsible in managing personal and school responsibilities. P2 echoed this, advising them to "*to stay committed to what they had promised upon entering the school*", suggesting that integrity to one's initial pledge is a cornerstone of professional longevity. P3 further suggests that new teachers should "*keep exploring and find where their passion and interests lie*" to ensure their career path remains aligned with their internal motivations. Furthermore, the emphasis on "*blooming where one is planted*" highlights a psychological adaptation strategy where teachers find fulfillment through self-discipline and content-focused growth, suggesting that sustaining

commitment is less about the absence of difficulty and more about the cultivation of an agile, growth-oriented mindset that integrates professional duty with personal passion.

In the Philippine context, this emphasis on commitment as a retention factor is well-documented. Research by Anog et al. indicates that in Philippine private schools, there is a significant correlation between a teacher's level of organizational commitment and their actual retention, suggesting that those who internalize the school's mission are far less likely to leave (Anog et al., 2024). This intrinsic loyalty is often more powerful than extrinsic rewards; Sumipo found that internal motivational factors, such as a sense of duty and personal fulfillment, are the primary drivers that keep teachers in private elementary schools despite economic constraints (Sumipo, 2020). Furthermore, to help new teachers build this resilience, David and Naparan emphasize the necessity of administrative interventions that foster a supportive environment, ensuring that the passion mentioned by participants is not extinguished by heavy workloads (David & Naparan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that seasoned teachers at Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc. remain in the institution primarily due to motivators such as interpersonal connectivity, institutional belongingness, professional mastery, and spiritual maturity—while simultaneously navigating dissatisfaction caused by hygiene factors like salary limitations, heavy workloads, and administrative demands. Interpreted through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, this duality demonstrates that teacher retention is sustained less by material incentives and more by intrinsic and transcendent motivators that transform teaching into a vocation. It is important to note that these conclusions are drawn from a small, purposively sampled group of seasoned teachers within a single private Catholic-Riverian institution in Davao City. As such, the insights cannot be generalized to all private schools in the Philippines or globally. Instead, they provide context-specific understanding of how faith-based values, interpersonal relationships, and institutional identity interact with economic realities to shape teacher retention in this setting. The study contributes to the literature by showing how motivators can outweigh deficiencies in hygiene factors, but it also underscores the need for administrative support to reduce workload pressures and strengthen institutional culture. Future research should expand to diverse private school contexts to test whether similar patterns of motivators and hygiene factors hold true across different faith-based and non-faith-based institutions.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings concerning the reasons, challenges, and benefits gained by the seasoned educators at Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc., the following recommendations are proposed to enhance institutional stability and teacher retention within the private education sector:

1. School administrators should prioritize the cultivation of a "family-like" ecosystem by organizing regular communal activities and team-building retreats that foster the interpersonal connectivity identified as a primary driver of teacher retention.
2. To mitigate the persistent public-private salary gap, private school boards are encouraged to develop policy-driven incentives such as enhanced educational subsidies for teachers' children and flexible scheduling to improve work-life balance.
3. Decision-makers should review accreditation requirements and administrative tasks to reduce the "multiple workloads" reported by participants, ensuring that seasoned teachers can focus on pedagogical mastery without succumbing to burnout.
4. Since this study focused on a single Catholic-Riverian institution with a small participant pool, future research should include a larger, more diverse sample across various types of private schools (non-sectarian vs. sectarian) to improve the generalizability of the findings.

5. Future studies should explore the quantitative relationship between spiritual direction programs and actual teacher retention rates to provide empirical data on the effectiveness of faith-based support systems in private education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was made possible through the support and contributions of several key individuals and the Divine:

First and foremost, I offer my deepest gratitude to Almighty God for the wisdom, strength, and spiritual guidance that sustained me throughout this scholarly journey.

My profound thanks go to Dr. James L. Paglinawan for his unwavering motivation and for pushing me to achieve the completion of this study

I am deeply grateful to the seasoned teachers of Holy Cross College of Calinan Inc. (HCCC), whose willingness to share their rich narratives of resilience and affective commitment provided the essential data for this inquiry. Their time and effort in articulating the complexities of their long-term service have been invaluable to the success of this research.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my parents, who serve as my primary inspiration in the pursuit of this master's degree and whose support continues to anchor my professional and personal growth.

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