

Teacher Retention in Rural Indonesian Schools: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Career Disorientation and Commitment

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ABSTRACT: In Indonesia, the chronic imbalance in teacher distribution—particularly the scarcity and attrition of educators in rural regions—has emerged as a national crisis that threatens educational equity and long-term system sustainability. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of teacher career development and retention in rural Indonesian schools using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, including elementary and secondary school teachers with 5–25 years of teaching experience, drawn from diverse rural provinces such as West Java, Central Sulawesi, and East Nusa Tenggara. The analysis was conducted through iterative coding and meaning-making cycles following the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework proposed by Smith et al. (2009), which facilitated the extraction of emergent themes and contextual insights. Six interrelated themes were identified: career path disorientation, lack of developmental support, professional alienation, delayed milestones, moral commitment, and systemic imbalance. Despite persistent structural adversities, many educators remain committed due to ethical loyalty and a sense of community responsibility. The study concludes that retention strategies must incorporate culturally grounded, participatory, and context-sensitive frameworks. Beyond practical policy recommendations, this research contributes conceptually to the academic discourse on teacher resilience, professional identity, and rural education reform in postcolonial education systems.

Keywords: Interpretative phenomenological analysis, Rural education, Teacher-career development, Teacher retention

ABSTRAK: Di Indonesia, ketimpangan kronis dalam distribusi guru—khususnya kelangkaan dan tingginya angka pengunduran diri guru di wilayah pedesaan—telah menjadi krisis nasional yang mengancam kesetaraan pendidikan dan keberlanjutan sistem dalam jangka panjang. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup pengembangan karier dan retensi guru di sekolah-sekolah pedesaan Indonesia dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi interpretatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dengan 18 partisipan, yang terdiri dari guru sekolah dasar dan menengah dengan pengalaman mengajar antara 5–25 tahun, yang berasal dari berbagai provinsi pedesaan seperti Jawa Barat, Sulawesi Tengah, dan Nusa Tenggara Timur. Analisis dilakukan melalui proses pengodean dan siklus pemaknaan secara iteratif menggunakan kerangka Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) yang dikembangkan oleh Smith et al. (2009), yang memfasilitasi penggalian tema-tema yang muncul dan wawasan kontekstual. Enam tema saling terkait yang diidentifikasi meliputi: disorientasi jalur karier, kurangnya dukungan pengembangan, keterasingan profesional, keterlambatan pencapaian, komitmen moral, dan ketimpangan sistemik. Meskipun menghadapi berbagai tantangan struktural yang berkelanjutan, banyak pendidik tetap bertahan karena loyalitas etis dan rasa tanggung jawab terhadap komunitas. Studi ini menyimpulkan

bahwa strategi retensi harus mengintegrasikan kerangka kerja yang berakar pada budaya, partisipatif, dan peka terhadap konteks. Di luar rekomendasi kebijakan praktis, riset ini memberikan kontribusi konseptual terhadap wacana akademik mengenai ketahanan guru, identitas profesional, dan reformasi pendidikan pedesaan dalam sistem pendidikan pascakolonial.

Kata kunci: *analisis fenomenologi interpretatif, pendidikan pedesaan, pengembangan karier guru, retensi guru.*

INTRODUCTION

In rural Indonesia, teacher attrition remains an unresolved crisis, despite the implementation of national strategies aimed at recruitment, redistribution, and professional development. Reports from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud, 2022) and corroborated by the World Bank (2020) indicate that more than 42% of rural and remote schools operate with underqualified or rotating teaching staff, which contributes to chronic learning disparities. The disparity is further exacerbated by uneven deployment, limited access to continuing professional development (CPD), and a lack of structured support for teacher career advancement. These structural issues persist despite the government's teacher redistribution schemes (e.g., SM3T, Guru Garis Depan), decentralized education management reforms post-2001, and policy innovations such as the sertifikasi guru and professional training programs under the PPPPTK framework.

This study is situated within this national crisis and seeks to critically examine how rural educators interpret and navigate their professional trajectories amidst systemic uncertainty. Despite an expanding body of global literature on teacher development, burnout, and retention intent (Bassot, 2024; De Clercq et al., 2022; Van den Borre et al., 2021), little is known about how teachers in rural Indonesian contexts—marked by infrastructural inequity and institutional invisibility—construct meaning around career discontinuities, stagnation, and moral perseverance.

Whether one elects to indict entrenched systemic structures or to embark upon an inward-facing praxis of professional agency, both trajectories illuminate post-truth dynamics permeating contemporary educational discourse (McMahon & Patton, 2021; Karakiş & Demirtaş, 2022). On one hand, macro-level critiques compel us to interrogate the institutional architectures shaping teacher experience—including decentralization mechanisms, resource asymmetries, and recognition politics. On the other hand, micro-level approaches emphasize teacher subjectivity, resilience, and the pursuit of lifelong learning despite ecological hardship (Bassot, 2024; Stephen, 2024). These dual lenses reveal that teacher career development can no longer be conceptualized as a predictable progression, but rather as a dialogic interplay between policy structures and lived realities.

Contemporary scholarship on teacher retention and professional continuity (Booth et al., 2021; J. A. Müller et al., 2021; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021) affirms the importance of context-sensitive frameworks that integrate personal, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions. The literature also reflects an

epistemic pivot: from normative metrics of career success toward complex analyses of disorientation, moral anchoring, and community entrenchment. In this study, we adopt an interpretative phenomenological lens to explore how rural teachers interpret their professional identities amidst structural incoherence. Specifically, we examine how mid-career teachers from under-resourced provinces such as Nusa Tenggara Timur, Central Sulawesi, and West Java construct meaning around their continued commitment to teaching despite encountering systemic neglect, delayed promotion, and professional alienation.

To guide this inquiry, we conceptualize rural teacher retention as the outcome of intersecting macro and micro forces, including institutional policy (decentralization, certification schemes), organizational climate (leadership, CPD access), psychosocial factors (burnout, identity, purpose), and affective geographies (community obligation, ancestral ties). A conceptual framework is included to map these interdependencies. While policy discourses often emphasize technical fixes or financial incentives, this study centers on teachers' phenomenological interpretations—how they narrate, negotiate, and embody persistence in spite of systemic gaps. Ultimately, this research addresses a critical knowledge gap by bringing rural Indonesian teacher voices into academic dialogue on professional sustainability. By foregrounding the moral, affective, and temporal logics that underpin retention, we aim to not only enrich scholarly understandings of teacher development but also inform locally grounded, culturally responsive education policies.

Teacher Career Development

Understanding teacher career development within the Indonesian rural education system necessitates both a micro-level view of individual aspirations and a macro-level analysis of systemic structures. To provide a coherent analytical lens, this study is anchored in Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Super's framework enables us to view teacher career development as a dynamic life-course process shaped by roles, life stages, and self-concept. In contrast, Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the multilayered influences—ranging from policy to community—that govern career pathways in under-resourced settings. These theories complement the phenomenological commitment to lived experience and allow for deeper exploration of teachers' internal negotiations within broader social ecologies.

Contemporary Indonesian policies such as the Guru Penggerak program, Pendidikan Profesi Guru (PPG), and the ASN PPPK system for 3T (terdepan, terluar, tertinggal) regions have sought to reformulate the career structure of teachers, especially in rural and marginalized areas. While these frameworks offer standardized qualifications and incentive-based placement, their implementation often fails to respond to the everyday realities of rural educators, many of whom experience delayed recognition, bureaucratic opacity, or isolation from professional networks. Moreover, historical tensions around teacher placement under decentralization policies post-2001 continue to affect the status and progression of rural educators (Kusumawardhani, 2017).

Despite structural constraints, rural teachers are not passive recipients of top-down mandates. Scholarship on teacher agency (e.g., Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) highlights how educators, even in resource-deprived environments, can enact professional autonomy, develop context-specific pedagogies, and cultivate community-based support structures. In the Indonesian context, local innovations such as Kampung Literasi (literacy villages) and teacher-led CPD forums reflect how rural educators redefine their roles amidst adversity. Such bottom-up movements deserve analytical attention as forms of resistance and renewal. Intersectionality remains a critical omission in prior studies on Indonesian teacher development. The interplay of gender, class, and ethnicity shapes differential experiences of opportunity and marginalization. For example, female teachers in rural areas often juggle professional duties with gendered expectations of domestic care, limiting their mobility and advancement. Studies on gendered career trajectories (Junaedi & Kurniawati, 2022) also show how patriarchal local cultures can stifle female leadership, despite national commitments to gender equality. Similarly, indigenous or minority educators—such as in Papua or rural Kalimantan—report systemic underrepresentation and limited access to institutional support, revealing the deep entanglement between identity and professional capital.

The literature further reveals that career discontinuities in rural settings are frequently marked by emotional labor and psychological endurance. While burnout is often diagnosed as an individual disorder, the more nuanced concepts of compassion fatigue and emotional geographies of teaching (see Hargreaves, 1998; Day & Gu, 2010) offer richer insights into how affective exhaustion correlates with isolation, moral injury, and structural neglect. Rural educators often operate in emotionally charged environments, where they are expected to serve not only as instructors but also as caregivers, counselors, and cultural brokers within their communities. While the Indonesian context provides the central empirical ground for this study, valuable insights can be drawn from comparative research in similarly situated countries. In the Philippines, studies by Reyes & Roldan (2019) demonstrate that teachers in mountainous provinces face parallel issues of delayed promotion and inadequate CPD access. In Sub-Saharan Africa, research from Kenya and Ghana highlights similar tensions between community obligation and professional aspiration (Tikly et al., 2013). These comparisons reveal a shared global pattern: rural teacher retention challenges emerge not simply from logistical barriers but from deeper sociopolitical configurations of inequality.

Finally, the digital divide, though a persistent concern in rural schools, also holds untapped potential for career development via digital CPD initiatives. The expansion of blended learning platforms and government-supported MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has enabled many rural teachers to access pedagogical resources, peer learning communities, and certification programs previously out of reach. Studies such as those by Dini & Wahyudi (2023) show that digital adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated professional autonomy among rural educators, many of whom began creating asynchronous

teaching content, joining WhatsApp-based CPD groups, or enrolling in government-endorsed e-learning portals. Hence, digital professional development may serve as both a retention tool and a democratizing force in teacher career trajectories—if supported with adequate infrastructure and policy consistency.

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention refers to the sustained engagement of educators in their professional roles within the same institution or system over time, particularly beyond the initial years of entry into the workforce. It is often used as a key indicator of educational system health, institutional climate, and leadership efficacy. Retention is not solely a matter of preventing attrition, but more critically, of fostering conditions that cultivate professional fulfillment, identity reinforcement, and institutional commitment. Research on teacher retention has evolved from documenting generic departure trends to identifying nuanced causes and contextual factors influencing teachers' decisions to stay. Brieschke (1983) initiated an important case-based exploration by examining urban school environments, showing how school climate and administrative responsiveness directly impact retention. This is echoed and extended by Nguyen et al. (2021), who used national cross-sectional data to reveal how school-level organizational characteristics—such as support structures, collaboration culture, and professional development access—strongly predict teacher longevity. These early empirical insights laid the groundwork for more targeted explorations. In rural education settings, retention dynamics are further complicated by geographic isolation and limited resources. Frahm and Cianca (2021) emphasize the pivotal role of leadership behaviors in sustaining teacher morale in such environments. Seelig and McCabe (2021) challenge the deficit-oriented narratives often applied to rural schools by reframing rural retention as a matter of community integration, shared values, and adaptive leadership. Their work foregrounds the importance of context in retention discourse and repositions rural educators as resilient actors rather than as vulnerable leavers. In parallel, studies have examined the effects of school leadership more broadly.

Becker & Grob (2021) highlight that principals function as critical mediators of teacher satisfaction and stability. Arthur and Bradley (2023) build on this by focusing on challenging school environments, arguing that empathetic, inclusive leadership can buffer the stressors typically leading to teacher attrition. A more systematic perspective is provided by Darron et al. (2023), who synthesize global literature and conclude that leadership consistency, communication openness, and recognition systems are among the most effective traits in retaining educators across diverse settings. Attention has also been given to the critical first years of teaching, often considered the most vulnerable period for attrition. Sabina et al. (2023) explore this temporal window, asserting that induction programs, mentorship, and structured peer support are key to retaining novice teachers during the formative three to five years. Casely-Hayford et al. (2022) extend this perspective internationally, identifying both individual psychological factors (such as self-efficacy and work-life balance) and contextual supports (like

collegiality and institutional trust) as equally decisive for teacher retention in Sweden.

Finally, programs that specifically aim to enhance teacher agency and sustained commitment through professional development are gaining traction. Luesse et al. (2022) present the “Academy for Teachers” model as a case in point, illustrating how intentional, high-quality CPD can reaffirm teachers’ sense of purpose and reduce attrition intentions by deepening professional engagement. In sum, teacher retention is a multifactorial phenomenon shaped by organizational, relational, and psychological elements. From early-career support systems to leadership behaviors and institutional ethos, the literature increasingly converges on the notion that retention is less about preventing departure than about actively cultivating conditions that make educators want to stay.

Rural School in Indonesia

Rural schools in Indonesia represent educational institutions located in geographically remote, socioeconomically marginalized, and infrastructurally underdeveloped areas, often far removed from the centralized education ecosystem and urban resource networks. These schools are frequently characterized by limited access to teaching materials, insufficient technological infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and minimal institutional support—all of which significantly hinder the realization of equitable educational outcomes across the archipelago. According to Shaturaev (2021), while Indonesia’s national education agenda aspires to provide inclusive, quality education, rural schools face systemic challenges in financing, teacher deployment, and academic quality, creating a persistent educational disparity between urban and rural regions.

The daily realities of rural schooling in Indonesia are further illustrated by studies on pedagogical constraints and adaptation. Shahnaz & Gandana (2021) emphasize the scarcity of subject-specialized teachers—particularly in English language education, where generalist educators must often assume roles beyond their professional training. This phenomenon is not isolated, as Khulel & Wibowo (2021) and Nakul & U C (2024) also highlights how teachers in rural areas frequently grapple with limited pedagogical tools, low student exposure to English outside the classroom, and cultural-linguistic disconnects between curriculum expectations and local realities. These limitations often force educators to improvise, using context-driven teaching strategies that prioritize survival over innovation. Inclusion in rural classrooms also emerges as a significant concern. Kurniawati (2021) explores the inclusive education strategies employed by rural primary teachers, revealing that while teachers display strong personal commitment, they are often unsupported by formal structures or training. This gap is particularly consequential in multi-grade classrooms where differentiated instruction becomes logistically and cognitively demanding.

Meanwhile, Amin et al. (2022) note that rural Islamic elementary schools (madrasah ibtidaiyah) reflect both religious motivation and infrastructural

limitations, with community-driven values sometimes compensating for institutional deficiencies. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerability of rural schools. Research by Wulandari et al. (2022) and Kusuma et al. (2022) documents how online learning initiatives were hampered by poor internet connectivity, lack of devices, and digital illiteracy among both teachers and students. Ahmad et al. (2024) similarly report that efforts to enhance science literacy through online platforms in rural contexts were severely constrained, resulting in widened learning gaps and reduced instructional effectiveness. These findings are echoed in Mustafa et al. (2024) systematic review, which identifies infrastructural inequality, inadequate teacher training in ICT, and cultural resistance as the principal barriers to effective technology integration in rural Indonesian education.

Despite these challenges, rural schools are also sites of resilience, cultural richness, and pedagogical innovation. Teachers often rely on community resources, oral traditions, and faith-based values to cultivate learning environments that, while modest, are deeply rooted in the local context. Thus, rural schools in Indonesia are not merely under-resourced; they are also uniquely adaptive institutions that reflect broader structural inequities in the national education system while embodying grassroots agency and improvisational strength. Understanding these characteristics is essential for designing teacher development and retention strategies that are responsive not only to pedagogical needs, but also to the geographical, cultural, and infrastructural realities in which these schools operate.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design, Site, and Participants

This study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design, enriched by methodological influences from post-intentional phenomenology and hermeneutic interpretation. The IPA approach, as articulated by Smith et al. (2009), centers on the idiographic exploration of participants' lived experiences, allowing for deep interpretative engagement with how individuals make sense of complex phenomena. In this study, the phenomenon under inquiry is the subjective experience of career development and professional retention among rural educators in Indonesia. To accommodate the complexity of the research context—including geographical dispersion, role diversity, and sociocultural embeddedness—the design embraced a hybrid epistemology. While IPA emphasizes descriptive depth at the individual level, post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle, 2018) supports the understanding of experience as fluid, emergent, and contextually constructed. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic tradition foregrounds reflexivity, language, and meaning, enabling the interpretation of not only what is said, but what is implied, silenced, or historically situated (van Manen, 2021; Zahavi, 2025).

This hybrid design was essential to unpack the tension between personal agency and systemic inertia experienced by rural educators. It also allowed for dialogical and iterative interpretation of meaning that extended beyond

participants' immediate articulation. The study's conceptual framework—anchored in Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory—helped guide thematic mapping across personal, institutional, and societal levels, offering structural clarity while maintaining phenomenological depth.

Although IPA typically favors smaller samples (6–10 participants) to preserve idiographic focus, the selection of 18 participants was theoretically justified. This broader inclusion enabled the research to capture the geographic variation across West Java, Central Sulawesi, and East Nusa Tenggara, and to reflect role-based variation across school actors (12 teachers, 3 principals, 3 educational supervisors). This expanded sample aligns with methodological precedents in IPA studies dealing with policy-relevant phenomena across plural contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Odongo & Ntara, 2024).

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews that prioritized narrative flow, phenomenological attentiveness, and emotional resonance. Interview questions were designed to elicit experiential detail surrounding career trajectories, motivations to stay or leave, institutional challenges, and personal meaning-making processes. The protocol was informed by phenomenological pedagogy (Sannipoli et al., 2025) and interpretative depth (Smith et al., 2009), with thematic openness that permitted emergent co-construction between researcher and participant.

Of the 18 interviews, 10 were conducted in person during field visits, while 8 were held remotely via Zoom or WhatsApp video calls. This hybrid engagement approach was determined by geographic limitations and health protocols related to the COVID-19 context. We acknowledge that virtual interviews in regions with unstable connectivity may have affected data richness and rapport; such limitations were mitigated by prolonged warm-up sessions and iterative follow-up where necessary.

Beyond interviews, the study incorporated limited triangulation through field observation and informal review of school-related documents, including professional development logs, local policy memos, and teaching portfolios. Observational data focused on contextual textures—such as infrastructure, school atmosphere, and collegial dynamics—enhancing ecological validity without shifting the study's phenomenological core.

To ensure reflexivity, the lead researcher maintained an analytical journal throughout data collection and analysis. Reflexive memos were composed after each interview, documenting positionality, assumptions, emotional responses, and thematic intuitions. These memos formed a critical intermediary layer between raw data and emergent interpretation, supporting epistemic humility and ethical rigor.

Validation was approached through member checking with 10 participants. Synthesized theme summaries were shared with these individuals to ensure the accuracy and resonance of interpretations. Their reflections were used not to

confirm data in a positivist sense but to enhance phenomenological fidelity by preserving narrative integrity and co-authored meaning.

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. Participants signed informed consent forms and were assured confidentiality. All names used in the manuscript are pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts. Audio files and transcripts were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team.

The decision to conclude data collection was based on the principle of phenomenological sufficiency, defined as the point at which interviews no longer produced substantially new insights but instead deepened and echoed existing thematic contours (van Manen, 2021). This interpretative density, rather than mere repetition, signaled thematic closure and analytical maturity..

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are systematically structured to reflect the central aim of exploring teacher career development and retention in rural Indonesian schools. The analysis follows an interpretative phenomenological lens, highlighting lived experiences, affective responses, and perceived institutional realities. Each major theme is drawn from recurring narratives across interviews, supported by vivid quotations and experiential accounts from informants (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and Sub-themes of Teacher Retention and Career Development

Themes	Sub-themes
Career Path Disorientation	Absence of Structured Promotion Pathways
	Inconsistencies in Career Expectations and Reality
Professional Development Disillusionment	Irrelevance of Available Training Programs
	Unequal Access to Professional Growth Opportunities
Institutional Support Deficit	Inadequate Leadership Recognition
	Weak Mentorship and Guidance Mechanisms
Psychosocial Burden and Fatigue	Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout
	Social Isolation in Rural School Settings
Coping and Adaptation Strategies	Peer Support Networks and Collegial Communities
	Spiritual Resilience and Personal Calling
Teacher Retention Motivation	Commitment to Community and Local Identity
	Aspirations for Long-Term Impact on Students' Lives

Career Path Disorientation

The theme of career path disorientation emerged as a pervasive and recurring sentiment across nearly all informants, encapsulating the sense of ambiguity, stagnation, and confusion many rural educators face in navigating their professional trajectory. Rather than being anchored by structured benchmarks or clear promotion criteria, many teachers found themselves drifting in an undefined professional landscape, often without guidance or institutional support. The absence of transparent and consistent career progression frameworks severely impacted teachers' professional motivation, identity, and long-term planning.

Absence of Structured Promotion Pathways

One of the most pronounced subthemes under this category was the teachers' experience of working without a clear understanding of how to advance their professional standing. Multiple informants expressed deep frustration over the unpredictable or opaque processes that governed promotion eligibility, certification upgrades, and recognition. In many cases, these mechanisms were either inaccessible or arbitrarily applied, leaving educators disoriented and disheartened. "I have been teaching for 17 years, and yet to this day, I've never received any official information about how to consistently get promoted. Every time I ask the education office, the answer is different." – Informant 1

Others described how bureaucratic obstacles, such as inconsistent verification procedures or overly rigid administrative hurdles, discouraged them from even attempting to pursue further advancement. Informant 3 recalled submitting documentation multiple times without receiving confirmation, leading to a sense of futility and institutional neglect. "I've taken part in two trainings and submitted my teaching portfolio, but to this day, I've heard nothing back. It feels like all that effort was for nothing." – Informant 3

This structural ambiguity contributes to what many described as a "looping phase," where years of teaching experience did not translate into upward mobility or even professional acknowledgment.

Inconsistencies in Career Expectations and Reality

The second subtheme under this theme revolves around the misalignment between what teachers expected upon entering the profession and what they actually experienced over time. Teachers shared that, upon becoming certified or completing government-sponsored training programs, they were led to believe that structured advancement would follow naturally. However, the reality was often starkly different. Informant 7, a mid-career teacher, described feeling "trapped in permanence" despite having met the formal academic requirements to advance. "During my teacher certification (PPG), we were told that graduation would lead to the next stage of our career. But afterward, nothing happened. No updates, no guidance. It just ended there, as if it didn't matter anymore." – Informant 7

Others voiced the psychological toll this disorientation takes, especially when paired with the pressure of administrative accountability and expectations from parents or the local community. The gap between aspiration and reality has

made many teachers feel professionally stagnant—unable to project their futures or even envision themselves as evolving professionals. Informant 6 highlighted how this gap influences not just motivation but their entire sense of professional identity. “They ask us to be professional teachers, but give us no direction. No roadmap. So how can we even feel like we’re growing?” – Informant 6.

This shared sense of uncertainty and professional disillusionment reinforces the urgent need for policy reconfiguration and administrative reforms. Teachers are not merely asking for rewards—they are seeking a meaningful, structured, and fair pathway that acknowledges their commitment and allows them to grow.

Professional Development Disillusionment

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews pertains to widespread dissatisfaction with the existing models and execution of professional development (PD) among rural Indonesian teachers. Rather than empowering or elevating, many PD initiatives were described as either bureaucratically tokenistic or misaligned with the actual needs of educators in the field. This disillusionment, while not always expressed in overt resistance, shaped teacher morale, perceived relevance of training, and long-term commitment to the profession.

Irrelevance of Available Training Programs

A recurring subtheme in this domain was the mismatch between what was offered in training sessions and what teachers genuinely needed to thrive in their classroom environments. Multiple informants cited examples of workshops or government-sponsored courses that focused heavily on theoretical or overly generalized content, often detached from rural teaching realities. “They invited me to a training about digital innovation, but the entire session was on apps we couldn’t even use because our school doesn’t have strong internet or electricity all day.” – Informant 2

Informants consistently voiced that training modules tended to reflect the assumptions and frameworks of urban or well-resourced schools, without any adjustment for rural constraints. In many cases, teachers were expected to participate in sessions that had minimal bearing on their daily classroom practice, leaving them frustrated and disengaged. Informant 4 reflected on how such programs feel performative. “It’s like the program was made just to check boxes for compliance. Nothing about our local challenges was ever discussed.” – Informant 4

The cumulative effect of these experiences has led many teachers to regard formal professional development with skepticism. Some even described these sessions as “mandatory interruptions” rather than meaningful opportunities for growth.

Unequal Access to Professional Growth Opportunities

Beyond the content of training, another layer of disillusionment stemmed from unequal or inconsistent access to advancement and learning opportunities. Informants spoke of how selections for training or development programs were often non-transparent, reliant on proximity to urban centers, personal networks,

or subjective administrative discretion. “I only got invited to training once, and that’s because my school principal pushed for me. Otherwise, I would never have been noticed.” – Informant 5

Some educators shared stories of repeatedly being excluded from major capacity-building opportunities despite years of service and demonstrable classroom performance. For many, these exclusions felt like implicit institutional messages that their growth was neither prioritized nor expected. “There are teachers in town who get called for every seminar and workshop. But us in the village? It’s like we don’t exist.” – Informant 9

This inequity has reinforced a sense of professional marginalization among rural educators, many of whom feel that their geographic isolation is wrongly interpreted as a lack of capability or ambition. It also fuels internalized doubt and impedes career planning, as access to PD is often tied to certification renewal or rank progression. The resulting picture is one in which professional development—intended to be a mechanism for empowerment—has paradoxically contributed to the erosion of morale and long-term motivation. Teachers are not rejecting the value of training; rather, they are calling for PD systems that are context-responsive, practically relevant, and equitably administered.

Institutional Support Deficit

Across numerous interviews, rural educators consistently voiced a prevailing sense of institutional neglect and absence of sustained professional nurturing. The theme of Institutional Support Deficit captures how systemic shortcomings—particularly in leadership recognition and mentoring structures—affect teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, and their decisions to remain or exit the profession. These patterns not only reveal emotional fatigue but also underscore the lack of relational scaffolding that teachers in rural areas critically need.

Inadequate Leadership Recognition

A dominant concern among informants was the lack of meaningful acknowledgment from school leaders and administrative superiors. Teachers expressed that their professional efforts, creative innovations, and even problem-solving strategies within the classroom often went unnoticed or were underappreciated. Recognition was perceived as limited to ceremonial events or performance reports, rarely linked to sustained engagement or strategic dialogue with leadership. “We only hear from the principal during evaluations. Outside of that, no one asks how we are doing or whether we need support in class.” – Informant 6

The absence of affirmation extended beyond emotional neglect. Informants explained that despite their tangible contributions—such as developing independent learning modules or mentoring peers—they received neither formal endorsement nor incentive. This cultivated feelings of invisibility and alienation, particularly when juxtaposed with centralized recognition structures that favored more urban or high-profile schools. “I’ve mentored new teachers, created materials for local use, but none of it gets counted. It’s like I’m just filling space, not

contributing anything meaningful.” – Informant 10. Such perceived disregard not only weakens motivation but also disrupts the feedback loop essential for pedagogical growth. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that without reflective dialogue or supportive acknowledgment from leadership, it becomes increasingly difficult to stay inspired in one’s role.

Weak Mentorship and Guidance Mechanism

Equally troubling was the near-absence of structured mentorship systems within rural schools. Many informants disclosed that they began teaching with little to no orientation and that professional companionship, if it emerged, was mostly informal and self-initiated. For early-career or mid-career educators, this vacuum of guidance created disorientation, technical insecurity, and emotional strain. “When I started teaching, I was given the key to the classroom and that was it. No one sat with me, no one showed me how things worked.” – Informant 8

Even for seasoned teachers, there was little to no access to peer learning frameworks or feedback sessions that could help them grow beyond routine teaching practices. Informant 7 described the professional culture as “solitary,” where each teacher manages on their own, and collaboration is often hindered by fear of being judged or misunderstood. “Everyone keeps to their own class, their own problems. We survive on instinct, not teamwork.” – Informant 7

This absence of mentoring structures is particularly detrimental in rural contexts, where digital access, updated pedagogical resources, and refresher training are already limited. Without intentional, ongoing support from more experienced mentors or institutional leadership, many teachers felt trapped in repetitive cycles of stagnation, unable to envision pathways for renewal or advancement.

The lack of institutional scaffolding—both in recognition and mentoring—leaves rural educators exposed to burnout, professional doubt, and eventual detachment. Addressing this theme requires more than procedural fixes; it demands cultural shifts in how teacher support is envisioned, operationalized, and sustained within Indonesia’s educational governance.

Psychosocial Burden and Fatigue

The theme of Psychosocial Burden and Fatigue surfaced as an underlying current in nearly all participant testimonies, revealing how the cumulative pressures of teaching in under-resourced, high-expectation environments manifest not only as professional strain but also as deep emotional exhaustion. This theme underscores how the absence of systemic safeguards exacerbates stress and threatens the long-term mental resilience of rural educators.

Emotional Exhaustion and Chronic Stress

Teachers recurrently described a sense of emotional depletion—brought on by overwhelming workloads, lack of institutional relief, and persistent pressure to perform across multiple roles. Unlike urban settings, rural schools often demand that a single teacher manage academic instruction, extracurricular planning, school reporting, and sometimes even community mediation. “Sometimes I teach,

clean, run extracurricular activities, and even help parents with paperwork. At the end of the day, I don't know who I am anymore—an educator or an all-purpose worker.” – Informant 5. Many teachers reported long-term exposure to such conditions without relief, leading to symptoms of fatigue, depersonalization, and a sense of eroding self-worth. Informant 11 poignantly captured this cumulative effect. “Every day feels like I'm walking with a heavy backpack that no one sees. You carry it alone, and even when you collapse, they ask you to keep going.” – Informant 11. This emotional toll is further compounded by the lack of psychosocial support systems, whether in the form of school counselors, peer-support circles, or mental health check-ins. The absence of such mechanisms leaves teachers not only overburdened but also profoundly isolated in managing their distress.

Conflict Between Personal Sacrifice and Institutional Apathy

Another critical subtheme emerged around the internal conflict many educators experienced: the ongoing personal sacrifices they make for their students versus the perceived indifference from institutional structures. Teachers recounted instances where they used personal funds to repair classrooms, buy student materials, or subsidize school activities—without any reimbursement or acknowledgment. “We were out of chalk for weeks. I bought it with my own money. If I didn't, the class would just stop. But no one from the office even knew—or cared.” – Informant 2

This recurring disconnect between teacher effort and institutional response bred feelings of abandonment and moral fatigue. Educators felt trapped between their ethical commitment to students and a system that continually exploits that very commitment. Informant 4 reflected on the moral weight of such choices. “It's hard to tell when you're being noble and when you're being used. We give so much—but receive so little in return.” – Informant 4.

The long-term psychosocial impact of this asymmetry has led many rural teachers to experience what can be described as ethical burnout: the fatigue that arises from continuously doing the right thing in a system that offers neither structural reinforcement nor emotional compensation. This theme underscores the urgent need to reimagine teacher well-being not as a peripheral concern, but as a central pillar of educational sustainability. The psychological health of rural educators is inextricably linked to the retention crisis; without addressing this burden, efforts toward professional development or systemic reform will be built on a foundation of fatigue.

Retention Intention and Moral Commitment

Amidst various structural constraints and emotional burdens, a powerful thread running through the interviews was the moral resolve that sustains many rural educators. The theme of Retention Intention and Moral Commitment explores the paradox of persistence—how, despite widespread frustration, many teachers choose to remain due to a deeply personal, ethically grounded dedication to their students and communities. This moral tether often compensates for what

institutional structures fail to provide, offering a psychological anchor that keeps educators in the profession.

Sense of Duty to Local Communities

Numerous informants expressed that their decision to remain in teaching, particularly in remote or underserved areas, was driven not by financial incentives or career advancement but by a sense of personal responsibility toward their students and the community at large. For many, the school was not merely a workplace, but a moral and cultural node within the village. “I could leave, yes. I could apply to schools in the city. But who will teach these children if I go? I was born here. It feels wrong to abandon them.” – Informant 9.

This sense of “grounded loyalty” was especially pronounced among teachers who themselves had been educated in the same communities. They described their teaching not as a job, but as a legacy. Informant 3, whose family had lived in the village for generations, reflected: “My father was also a teacher here. Now I’m in his shoes. It’s not just a career—it’s a duty passed down. If I quit, I break the chain.” – Informant 3. This intergenerational responsibility often outweighed dissatisfaction with the profession, transforming what might otherwise be seen as hardship into a calling infused with emotional and spiritual significance.

Moral Anchoring and Identity as a Teacher

Beyond community obligation, many participants described teaching as inextricable from their personal identity. Even those who had contemplated leaving the profession admitted that the intrinsic meaning they derived from teaching, particularly from the relational aspects of student growth, kept them grounded. “When a student finally understands something I’ve explained all week, that smile—they’ll never forget it. And neither will I. That moment reminds me why I stay.” – Informant 1.

This form of moral anchoring provided a source of internal resilience against external frustrations. Informant 6 recounted a period of deep discouragement but ultimately chose to remain, moved by a student’s gesture: “I was about to resign. But one student gave me a drawing that said, ‘You’re the only teacher who listens to me.’ I cried for hours. And I stayed.” – Informant 6. Such emotionally charged moments serve as informal but powerful “retention anchors,” reminding teachers of the humanistic core of their work—one that no policy, training, or salary can replace. Even when career disillusionment or fatigue sets in, the affective rewards of student connection often act as buffers against withdrawal. However, while moral commitment is noble and sustaining, it should not be mistaken for an endless reservoir. As several informants warned, relying solely on inner conviction without structural support risks long-term emotional depletion. Thus, this theme suggests not only the admirable tenacity of rural teachers but also highlights a fragile equilibrium—one that must be supported institutionally to avoid collapse.

Structural Disparity and Systemic Imbalance

The theme of Structural Disparity and Systemic Imbalance synthesizes many of the underlying challenges faced by rural educators in Indonesia. While previous

themes have captured the psychological, institutional, and moral dimensions of the teacher experience, this final theme situates those narratives within the broader asymmetries of education policy, governance, and infrastructure. It reveals how disparities in resources, policy execution, and bureaucratic responsiveness generate an uneven educational landscape—one that systematically disadvantages rural teaching environments and erodes long-term retention.

Uneven Resource Allocation

A persistent concern voiced by informants was the glaring inequality in the distribution of educational resources. Teachers in rural schools reported severe shortages in basic materials—chalk, whiteboards, internet access, even textbooks—compared to their urban counterparts. These material disparities not only limited instructional creativity but also conveyed a symbolic message: that rural schools were lesser priorities in the national education agenda. “Every year we request basic supplies. And every year the boxes never arrive. Meanwhile, my friend in the city got brand-new projectors.” – Informant 8.

Informants spoke of using personal funds to provide students with paper, pencils, or even to repair furniture. This systemic inequity placed an added financial and emotional burden on teachers, who felt compelled to make up for the state’s absence through personal sacrifice. “One time, the blackboard was so cracked we couldn’t write on it. I ended up buying a new one with my own money. No one reimbursed me. They didn’t even say thank you.” – Informant 10. This chronic neglect in resource provision, as teachers noted, not only hinders pedagogical delivery but fosters a cumulative demoralization—a sense that rural schools, and by extension their teachers, are invisible to the system that governs them.

Bureaucratic Indifference and Policy Mismatch

In addition to resource disparity, many informants described a bureaucratic environment that was detached, opaque, and poorly attuned to rural realities. Teachers frequently received policy mandates that seemed illogical or impractical in their settings—such as digital reporting systems in areas without stable electricity, or instructional models that presupposed small class sizes and high-tech tools. “They asked us to submit daily lesson logs online. We don’t even have a working internet connection. I had to go to the next village just to upload a file.” – Informant 12. This disconnect between top-down directives and ground-level feasibility created a widening gap of trust between rural educators and the broader education system. Informants lamented that while the system often demanded compliance, it rarely solicited feedback—or worse, penalized those who tried to voice local concerns.

“If we raise a problem, they say we’re being uncooperative. But how can we follow orders that don’t match our context?” – Informant 13. As a result, many teachers developed a defensive relationship with bureaucracy—doing the bare minimum to comply, while privately adjusting to realities with improvised

solutions. This pattern reflects a form of “silent resistance” born from systemic fatigue rather than rebellion. The compounded impact of material neglect and policy incongruity illustrates a structural imbalance that cannot be corrected through individual effort alone. It requires a paradigmatic shift—one in which rural teachers are not merely implementers of distant decisions but are recognized as epistemic agents whose context-sensitive knowledge is essential to sustainable reform.

Discussion

The phenomenological textures emerging from this study revealed that the moral and existential motivations driving teacher perseverance in rural Indonesia are not merely personal convictions but deeply sociocultural enactments. One teacher from East Nusa Tenggara, for example, described her role as “bukan hanya mengajar, tapi menjaga kampung saya dari ketertinggalan”—a sentiment that signals how teaching is entangled with community safeguarding. Another participant reflected, “Saya tidak ingin anak-anak di sini merasa bahwa mereka tidak berhak bermimpi hanya karena mereka tinggal jauh dari kota.” These expressions of pedagogical affect—inflected with duty, locality, and spirituality—ground the abstract themes of loyalty and moral vocation within emotionally resonant life-worlds.

Such motivations, however, are inseparable from Indonesia’s cultural substrata, particularly the enduring ideals of gotong royong (mutual assistance) and adat (local customary law). Many participants framed their persistence through communal logics, emphasizing collective resilience over individual gain. The Pancasila principle of *Kemanusiaan yang adil dan beradab* (just and civilized humanity) also surfaced implicitly in narratives where teachers justified their hardship as service to national unity. Moreover, religious identity served as a spiritual scaffold for moral endurance. Muslim educators often invoked *ikhlas* (sincerity), while Christian teachers in rural Sulawesi described their teaching as a “calling” or “blessing,” highlighting how moral resilience is anchored in diverse faith-based epistemologies.

Yet, while these affective and spiritual motivations are powerful, they risk being romanticized if detached from the structural precarity that necessitates such inner fortitude. Teachers’ loyalty is often a coping strategy—not a sustainable substitute—for systemic neglect. Participants frequently voiced disillusionment with unequal promotion pathways, lack of recognition from urban-based policymakers, and burdensome bureaucratic requirements that undermine their autonomy. One senior teacher in Central Sulawesi observed: “Kita diminta berprestasi, tapi tidak pernah diberi kesempatan. Padahal semangat kami tidak kurang.” This contradiction calls for policy-level introspection: valorizing teacher moral agency should not become an excuse to delay reform.

To this end, the findings support several concrete policy recommendations. First, a contextualized promotion system must be developed that recognizes rural-specific contributions—such as multi-grade teaching or community-based literacy initiatives—within career advancement frameworks. Second, decentralized and

demand-driven professional development models should be established, allowing rural teachers to articulate their own training needs rather than passively receiving uniform modules. Third, a formal recognition mechanism that honors long-term rural service—such as annual fellowships, salary increments, or public awards—could help reframe rural teaching as aspirational rather than punitive. Fourth, and most urgently, well-being programs tailored to rural educators—including mental health support, emotional debriefing spaces, and flexible leave arrangements—are imperative for long-term retention.

A critical dimension of this study lies in its reflexive engagement with researcher positionality. The primary researcher, having previously served in urban teacher training initiatives, entered the field with assumptions about systemic failure and underutilized teacher agency. However, through prolonged immersion and iterative interpretation, a more nuanced understanding emerged—one that honored teacher resistance without idealizing suffering. The intimacy of in-depth interviews, particularly in home or school settings, shaped the co-production of meaning: gestures of silence, trembling tones, and moments of religious invocation often spoke louder than articulated words. This interpretative closeness, while ethically fraught, was central to the phenomenological fidelity of the study.

Comparatively, many themes identified here resonate with rural education literature from the Global South. In the Philippines, studies note how community loyalty is often used by the state to mask infrastructural neglect (Macaspac, 2021). In India, female rural teachers face similar conflicts between familial obligations and institutional demands, especially in tribal areas (Sharma & Mehta, 2020). In Nigeria, moral agency among teachers has been described as both empowering and exploitative, depending on the extent of state support (Adebayo & Oyetola, 2022). These parallels underscore that moral commitment, while valuable, is fragile when unaccompanied by structural reform.

Ultimately, this study contributes not only to phenomenological scholarship on rural teacher subjectivity, but also to broader discourses on how policy, spirituality, and culture co-construct educational resilience. The meaning of “being a teacher” in rural Indonesia cannot be fully understood through institutional metrics alone; it must be interpreted through a tapestry of moral imagination, cultural duty, and everyday struggle. And while these forces illuminate the nobility of rural education, they also illuminate the urgency of redesigning systems that no longer rely on personal sacrifice as the engine of national progress.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the lived interiority of rural Indonesian educators whose career trajectories are marked not only by structural constraints but also by enduring moral resolve. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, we accessed a deeply human register of teaching: the emotional labor of serving marginalized communities, the personal sacrifice of navigating bureaucratic complexity, and the affective connection to local identity and tradition. Participants' voices transformed abstract policy challenges into grounded,

emotional landscapes—revealing what it feels like to teach in isolation, to persist without recognition, and to find meaning in relational responsibility rather than career reward. These findings reaffirm that teacher retention in Indonesia's rural zones is shaped not merely by institutional policy but by dense sociocultural fabrics. The ethos of 'gotong-royong', local governance dynamics (pemerintahan desa), religious worldviews (ikhlas, panggilan iman), and inherited social contracts deeply inform teachers' moral decisions to remain. Rural educators are not simply employees; they are custodians of community continuity, often functioning as the final thread between state services and marginalized populations.

Methodologically, the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proved essential in surfacing the ethical dilemmas, emotional contradictions, and culturally situated meanings that would remain obscured in other research approaches. IPA allowed for an idiographic unfolding of each participant's world, enabling us to interpret how teachers simultaneously navigate structural disillusionment and ontological conviction. This methodological approach not only accessed what participants do, but how they feel, interpret, and narrate their place within educational systems that often exclude them.

The study proposes several specific, actionable interventions rooted in contextual insight. First, establish locally coordinated mentorship schemes that connect new teachers with experienced rural educators—reinforcing community-based knowledge transfer. Second, develop community-based promotion tracks that reward grassroots innovation, multi-grade teaching, and long-term village service. Third, design flexible and school-led CPD models where teachers choose development paths aligned with local constraints and needs, rather than receiving top-down mandates. These targeted reforms would help realign national educational strategies with the lived ecology of rural schools. Finally, we assert that rural teacher retention is not merely a logistical issue but a moral imperative. It raises fundamental questions of educational justice, dignity, and recognition. To expect teachers to persist on the basis of loyalty alone—while denying them fair opportunities, support, and visibility—is ethically untenable. The state's responsibility is not only to administer but to honor its educators, especially those who serve where systems fail most. In affirming the humanity behind rural teaching, this study invites a more compassionate and responsive reimagining of education policy—one that sees every village teacher not as a statistical outlier, but as the moral center of national learning.

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