



Article

FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMAND: AN EMIC EXPLORATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AMONG TEACHERS JOINING UNIFORMED SERVICE

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of former teachers from Isabela, Philippines, who transitioned into uniformed service. Through in-depth interviews, the research identified key factors behind this career shift. Participants leave teaching because of systemic problems within the teaching profession which includes, excessive paperwork, administrative burdens, and limited professional growth. They were drawn to uniformed service because of clearer career pathway, better compensation, benefits and allowances, and a healthier work-life balance. The career transition involved significant challenges, that include the rigorous physical training and their difficulties in adapting to a strict hierarchical culture. A central finding was the enduring nature of their teacher identity despite the career shift; they were able to repurpose their pedagogical skills in roles in the uniformed service like community education and PDL (Person Deprived of Liberty) rehabilitation. The study concludes that this professional migration reflects a search for professional growth within public service, stressing the issues in education while emphasizing the adaptability of teacher identity.

Keywords: *Career transition, teacher identity, phenomenological study, professional growth*



Introduction

Teachers play a pivotal role in every society all over the world, the force that shapes the future of a nation and generation. Lays within them the responsibility to mold and nurture students that would soon lead the country. Their impact as teachers extends across social, economic, and cultural aspects of their students, reshaping communities and nation through their dedication. However, despite these accolades, teachers face persistent challenges related to low pay, unfavorable working conditions, and lack of institutional support are the reasons that contribute to teacher attrition and Turnover (Kasanga, 2023).

The difficulties teachers encounter include overwhelming administrative burden that divert their focus from instruction. Schneider et al., (2020) noted that insufficient administrative personnel forces teachers to take on additional clerical and administrative designations further straining their capacity for teaching and contributing to their stress and burnout, a leading factor that leads to eventual attrition from the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). In the Philippines, where the curriculum is rigid, teachers face not only instructional responsibilities but also numerous administrative tasks including clerical duties, record keeping, property custodianship, and participation in various programs and training unrelated to teaching (David et al., 2021). These additional workloads significantly reduce time for actual teaching and student engagement. It is a burden that detract the teachers from instructional quality Cahilog et al., (2023) that leads to teachers' exhaustion and dissatisfaction.

Aulia and Haerani (2023) identified several factors that are challenge to teachers, pay, working conditions, school culture, administrative and peer support, and personal and family circumstances. Similarly Cahilog et al., (2023) found that Filipino teachers leave for reasons including low pay, delayed salary payments, inadequate recognition for their efforts, excessive work obligations, and lack of job satisfaction.

Studies have been conducted investigating and looking for answers as to why teachers s leaves their careers in the country and choose to migrate contributing further to the country's growing teacher attrition rate. But there is a limited study regarding teacher attrition and turnover that focuses on teachers leaving the teaching profession and transitions into uniformed profession in the country.

This gap in local research justifies the present study. By exploring the lived experiences on the career transition of former teachers into uniformed professions, centering on the emic perspective to capture the teachers personal motivations, emotions, and lived experiences and by amplifying the voices of these educators, this study provides deeper understanding of their subjective realities and the nuanced reasons behind their career shifts, presenting a richer narrative that reflects the internal struggles and aspirations of teachers who made the difficult decision to leave the profession.

Objectives of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of former teachers who have transitioned into uniformed professions, focusing on their motivations, challenges, insights and social meanings they attach regarding their career shift.

Specifically, it sought to:

1. explore the personal motivations and factors that drive former teachers to leave the teaching profession for uniformed roles.
2. determine the challenges and second thoughts encountered by former teachers throughout their career transition and adaptation process.
3. document the personal narratives and lived experiences of former teachers who transitioned into uniformed professions.
4. provide insights into how personal and systemic factors shape teachers' career transitions and professional identities and the meanings they attach to this shift.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of former teachers who transitioned into uniformed service. This method of research was utilized because it is suitable in exploring the personal experiences of teachers who transitioned into uniformed profession and it allowed the researcher to explore how participants give meanings to their lived experiences, rather than merely quantifying data (Ismail & Kinchin, 2023). The strategy allowed in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, motivations, challenges, identity transformations, and insights, captured the participants own emic perspectives. Phenomenological approach was used to capture deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of experiences the participants had helped attach meanings to experiences from the perspective of those who experienced the phenomenon.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a set of guide questions used in the data gathering designed for former teachers who transitioned into the uniformed service. These guide questions were made for this study and based on its objectives. The guide questions are not adapted from existing tools and published studies but were originally crafted to fit the subject and context of the research.

To guarantee the validity and reliability of the instrument, these questions were validated by experts from the Faculty of the Graduate School of Quirino State University to ensure the order, consistency, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives.

Sampling Procedure

Snowball sampling was utilized to identify and recruit participants for the study which are former teachers now working in the uniformed service. It started with two (2) participants who referred other prospective participants that are working in the uniformed sector that are former teachers. The inclusion criteria set forth required the participants to be former teachers from Isabela, currently employed in either of the tri-bureau Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) and Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), a minimum of two (2) to three (3) years of teaching experience, and similarly to establish a meaningful tenure in their present profession a minimum of two (2) to three (3) years' service in the uniformed sector.

Research Participants

The participants of study are former teachers who are now working in the uniformed service sector like Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) in Isabela, consisting of seven (7) uniformed personnel.

Research Procedure

After the participants were identified and recruited through snowball sampling, the researcher contacted and message them through telegram and facebook messenger to build connection and introductions and gain their trust confidence and ensure ethically guided engagement. For participants who agreed to took part in the study were scheduled for an interview based on their available date, time and preferred place. Two round in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants in two different periods, in a schedule that suits their availability. The interviews followed the method of *pakikipag-kwentuhan*, a culturally grounded, conversational approach that draws out insights and information through informal, friendly dialogue with the participants (Valdez, 2016).

Before each session of interviews, consents from participants were obtained, the purpose and procedure of the study were explained. Engagement and involvement of the participants are entirely voluntary and willingness to participate, the participants are informed that they can withdraw from the study at any point. With the permission of the participants all the interview sessions were audio-recorded, contents of the interview were transcribed and coded.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis used in the study followed the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to examine the qualitative data gathered. First, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts couple of times to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. Second, they extracted and marked significant terms, expressions, and concepts through a coding process. After coding, the researcher organized related answers into clusters, which helped identify emerging themes reflecting shared patterns.

After themes emerged, they were carefully examined and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data gathered. Once this process was complete, each theme was assigned a clear description to capture main ideas. Finally, the researcher interpreted these themes and linked them to established studies and theoretical frameworks. In particular, Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used in knowing and understanding how the participants adapt into significant changes in life, particularly in career transition, and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory to understand how these career transitions are impacted by the changing roles people occupy throughout their lives, is especially pertinent to comprehending the changing identities of participants as they transition from teaching to uniformed services and finally emic perspective are adopted to understand people's subjective, insider experiences . This approach enabled the researcher to systematically structure the information and develop a more profound understanding of the lived experiences of the participants who moved from teaching careers to roles within the uniformed services.

Ethical Considerations

All established ethical protocols governing research with human participants were adhered to and complied with. Before any data were obtained, participants' consent was secured after briefing them with the purpose and nature of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary and based on willingness, and they were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any point without facing any consequences.

All the participants' personal information was anonymized to protect their identity and confidentiality. All information obtained from the interviews was placed in protected storage, with access restricted solely to the researcher. Throughout the entirety of the research process, the study followed institutional regulations and adhered to the core ethical principles of respect, confidentiality, and integrity.

Results/ Findings

From the phenomenological analysis of data, the following themes were formed:

1. Factors/ Reasons in Leaving Teaching Profession

It is about the experiences and conditions within the teaching profession that push the participants to decide to leave teaching and despite their passion for learners and dedication in teaching, systemic constraints, excessive demands, and limited growth opportunities and promotions drive them to leave teaching.

1.1 Paperwork Overload and School Administrative Burden

One most recurring sentiment expressed by the participants pertains to the excessive paperwork, designations that are either unrelated to their line of specialization and/or lack of training and guidance for the execution of the designation, and it also includes issues related to school's system and leadership.

Participant Responses:

I really enjoyed working in DepEd, but when it came to paperwork, there was just so much. Sometimes reports would suddenly be given, and you had to submit them immediately. It felt toxic that you had to search for and gather data. And the timing was difficult because when they issued reports or memos, the deadlines were very tight. That was one of the reasons I decided to transfer to the bureau. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 8, 2025)

There was so much paperwork. That became my main struggle back then... I was really discouraged by all the paperwork. (Personal Communication, Participant #6, November 22, 2025)

The narratives demonstrated that while teachers enter the profession with a passion for instruction, systemic administrative demands can erode that passion over time. The participants did not leave teaching because they disliked working with students. They left because the job had become overloaded with paperwork that pulled them away from teaching.

1.2 Limited Professional Growth

Another reason that drove teachers to leave teaching was the slow pace of career progression and promotion, which they needed to boost their earnings. This lack of mobility left them feeling stuck, compounded by very few chances to enhance their professional skills that could also serve as qualifications for promotional assessments and open better career routes for them within the educational system.

Participant Responses:

When I was teaching, Monday to Friday you're at school, then on Saturday you still have to do reports or any other school work. On Sunday, you'd work on your DLL and other school tasks again. Monday it starts all over again. I thought to myself, this same routine would go on until I retire, until I turn 65. That would be what you do every day, every week, every month, every year... I told myself, if it's only like this, you won't grow because that's it you'll just stay there, get used to it, going from classroom to home, and then back to the classroom again. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 8, 2025)

Yes, my professional growth didn't go well. The hindrance there was, you know, the system. The system was flawed. There was no enjoyment, and you really lose motivation. That's why you leave. (Personal Communication, Participant #3, November 22, 2025)

The narratives reveal a consistent pattern of dissatisfaction rooted in a perceived lack of professional growth within the teaching profession. The participants described teaching as a cycle of repetitive tasks that extended beyond regular school hours, leaving little room for development. Their weekends are filled with paperwork, DLL preparation, and sudden administrative reports needed to be submitted in a very short period of time for preparation.

2. Reasons In Shifting Career in the Uniformed Profession

The decision of teachers to shift from classroom and school work to uniformed service is influenced by combinations of reasons like personal goal, better career opportunities, and work life balance.

2.1 Career Mobility and Advancement

One motivation of the participants in leaving the teaching profession is the vision of clearer and better career mobility and advancement in the uniformed service, contrary to the slow and undefined promotion pathways in the teaching profession.

Participant Responses:

You will grow in the Bureau because, sir, in the Bureau, as time goes by, when you get promoted, you will go through a lot of schooling. So, with your schooling, of course, your level of knowledge in the Bureau will increase, and your learning will expand to other things happening in the Bureau... because in the Bureau, sir, we have a subject called investigation course. And in the investigation course, after you undergo in it, there are other trainings as

well. They cover different topics each time. Similarly, sir, as your rank increases, you need to learn different kinds of programs in the Bureau... each topic is different, sir, as your rank goes up. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 8, 2025)

The career progression here is also good because there are mandatory trainings that you must attend, which will later help you when you are assessed for promotion. There are also schoolings provided here, sir, that you just attend, unlike in teaching where you have to look for them yourself and pay all the costs. Here, they are provided and mandatory to ensure better service. (Personal Communication, Participant #5, November 22, 2025)

I gained, I think, what is called professional growth. Because I underwent various trainings, and I got involved in different activities. I participated in conducting the activities planning, implementing. I was already part of those processes. (Personal Communication, Participant #6, November 22, 2025)

The participants consistently described that the uniformed sector presented a career pathway where professional advancement appeared more structured, encouraging, and reachable in comparison to their prior roles in education, the participants went on to explain that moving up in rank within the bureau came with successive training opportunities that improved both their practical competencies.

2.2 Better Salary and Benefits

Another important factor that largely influenced teachers in migrating professionally in the uniformed service is salary, and benefits. The participants perceive their income in teaching as very low given the bulk of work to do, reports to produce and many school and classroom responsibilities to handle.

Participant Responses:

So, I can say I'm settled, sir, because, as everyone probably knows, many people apply to the Bureau because of the salary. In terms of salary, sir, I can say that I'm settled. The more your rank increases and the longer you stay in the service, sir, the higher your salary really becomes in the Bureau. I can say I'm settled in the Bureau. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 8, 2025)

I went to that agency (BJMP) because I felt that, aside from not being too stressed and without needing to bring paperwork at home, the salary was also better. And I can attest that the benefits and allowances are good. (Personal Communication, Participant #6, November 22, 2025)

The participants viewed better salary and benefits as a pivotal factor in their decision to leave teaching and enter the uniformed service. Their accounts give a strong contrast between the financial realities of teaching with all the bulks of paper works and another administrative tasked carried by them compare to the more stable, progressive compensation structure they have experienced in their current profession now. This disparity shaped their perception that the uniformed profession offered not only fairer pay but also a more family friendly time.

2.3 Healthier Work-Life Balance

Healthy work-life balance appeared to be another key factor driving teachers in their decision to move into the uniformed service. Teachers turned uniformed personnels expresses their experiences of working long hours, performing administrative tasks that are burdensome, and performing responsibilities that are beyond school and classroom premises which leaves them little time for their own personal needs, rest and peace of mind and family life and time.

Participant Responses:

We have one week on duty and one week off. We're on duty for a week doing work-related tasks. Then when we have our one-week off, sir, of course it's family time. You get to spend time with your parents, your siblings, your friends, sir. During that one week with no work, you know, you own your own time. You can go anywhere and it's fine because you're not thinking about work. It's your day off... and for us here, from Monday to Sunday, you can do things freely as long as it's your day off. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 8, 2025)

Now, I've had more time for my family, I've felt more fulfilled, and I've gained a clearer vision. Because I can really focus on it. I go to the jail, do a bit of work, then I go home again. I don't have anything else to think about. All my time is here now." (Personal Communication, Participant #6, November 22, 2025)

A recurring theme of attaining a better balance between job and personal life surfaced from the participants accounts. Their stories showed that the teaching profession demanded long hours, a heavy load of paperwork, and tasks that frequently extended into evenings and weekends conditions that left little room for rest, personal care, or time with family

3. Challenges Encountered in Transition

Although moving from the teaching profession to the uniformed service opens up improved opportunities, this transition also bring its own set of obstacles and hardships for former teachers. Shifting from education to the uniformed sector introduced teachers to a fresh array of professional expectations, forcing them to navigate an entirely different organizational culture and work environment.

3.1 Physical Demands

The participants described their physical training as demanding, unexpected, and requiring significant adjustment, pushing them to achieve a higher level of physical fitness in order to thrive in a more physically rigorous work environment.

Participants Responses:

The training, sir, was difficult. It was far from the kind of training I expected it wasn't just training; it was more physical. You'll get drained physically, extremely tiring. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 25, 2025)

What I thought was that we would just roll hoses and spray water. But no, there was actual training. There were knuckle drills, head-stabbing drills. (Personal Communication, Participant #3, November 29, 2025)

The participants identified the physical requirements of the uniformed service as one of the greatest hurdles they faced from moving away to teaching. Their accounts, as reflected in their statements, highlighted a clear contrast between the physical expectations of working in a classroom and the intense conditioning demanded during uniformed training. Their narratives also revealed that the training process challenged not just their physical strength but also their emotional endurance and the strength of their commitment to the career change they had made.

3.2 Emotional Strain and Doubts

This illustrates how the participants managed their feelings of uncertainty about their career choice, regulated their emotions, and rebuilt their self-assurance while undergoing training to adapt to their new responsibilities. The transition experienced by these former teachers brought about emotional strain and self-doubt as they adjusted to a completely different professional environment.

Participant Responses:

Actually, sir, it's funny to say, but on just the second day of training, I already wanted to quit and go back to teaching... it was only day 2, and like I said, I already wanted to quit then and return to DepEd (Department of Education). (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 15, 2025)

Yes, I doubted. Because I was thinking that maybe I could not handle the work or the training. Maybe my body could not keep up with the training because I'm thin. Also, I really did not want to leave teaching. I did not want to leave because teaching is my passion. So that was one of the reasons I had second thoughts before and during the training. (Personal Communication, Participant #7, November 15, 2025)

The participants revealed that as early as the second day of training, thoughts of quitting had already begun to surface. They started questioning whether leaving the teaching profession had been the right decision and whether they could withstand the physical, mental, and emotional demands of the training program. All of these experiences suggest that emotional strain and self-doubt are natural components of any career transition process.

3.3 Adjusting to Chain of Command

This relates to the strategies the participants used to adapt to their new work environment, which places strong emphasis on obeying direct commands, understanding and following rank-based protocols, and at times adhering to seniority-driven practices.

Participant Responses:

If it's not ordered to you, don't do it. Then everything you do, sir, should be under the instruction of your superior... as a uniformed officer, sir, it's hard to resist. Do it first before resisting if you can't handle it anymore... Always rely on instructions. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 15, 2025)

In the uniformed service, you need to follow without asking why. During training, that was the part I disliked the most. You have to follow. You might ask why, but why ask

why? Just follow and follow. That was their advice to me, just follow and follow until you follow no more, whatever the order is, just do it first. (Personal Communication, Participant #7, November 29, 2025)

Participants emphasized the need to follow instructions without questioning, stressing the importance of disciplined in a hierarchical nature of uniformed organizations like the tri-bureau. Their narratives described learning to rely on instructions from superiors, knowing that adherence to the chain of command was essential for operational efficiency in their organization and new roles, after all their civilian mentality was already removed during their training in camps.

3.4 Identity Transformation

The participants underwent a profound change in both their personal and professional identities. This transformation required moving away from the caring and instructional role they once held as teachers and embracing a more disciplined, authoritative demeanor typical of the uniformed service.

Participant Responses:

Part of the training is really about removing your civilian mentality so you can transform into uniformed personnel... if you have a civilian mentality, you'll keep resisting what you're told to do. Like in DepEd, if you're told to do something, you can say, I don't want, sir, I don't know and that's it. (Personal Communication, Participant #1, November 15, 2025)

When I was still a civilian, let's say, I was a bit more careless. Like, it was fine to say things, express your actions, your ideas openly. But when I entered the agency, I developed a sense that, not that it was forbidden, but on my part, it felt like it wasn't allowed. Like a boundary. That's because of the discipline they taught us. That's how it was. (Personal Communication, Participant #6, November 29, 2025)

The participants' accounts illustrate that shifting from teaching to the uniformed service demanded a substantial transformation in their mindset. Former educators described moving away from a civilian perspective defined by adaptability, independence, and open communication, and toward the disciplined, rank-conscious, and rule-based approach required in uniformed roles.

4. Mentality Change

The participants talked about how moving from teaching to a uniformed career affected the way people around them perceived them. They reflected on how this professional shift influenced others' views of them as well as their own awareness of societal expectations.

Participant Responses:

Of course, people will ask... some even ask, you're a teacher, so why are you there (BFP)? Because the truth in life is, it's not just that you really want to teach. You really want to serve the public. Because the main... first and foremost reason why you're here and not teaching is that you are aiming—or looking—for a stable job with a good environment

that isn't toxic, work where you can grow professionally and personally. (Personal Communication, Participant #3, November 29, 2025)

We can't avoid those kinds of reactions, especially from people close to you who expect you teaching because that's what you studied, you're a board passer. Those are all the expectations, the should of other people, but they don't see the difficulties and situations that pushed you to leave teaching, even if you didn't want to." (Personal Communication, Participant #4, 2025)

When it comes to my close circle, family, and friends, they know the difficulties in my teaching experience, so at some point they understood why I chose to transfer. After all, I'm qualified and I have the eligibility, sir. And I can say they were supportive. (Personal Communication, Participant #5, November 29, 2025)

The participants generally focused on their personal reasons for changing careers and chose to disregard negative remarks. This indicates that social responses varied from confusion to appreciation, yet the participants maintained their sense of direction and self-assurance, emphasizing that personal drive and professional development guided their decision regardless of societal expectations.

Discussion

Participants pointed to excessive paperwork and administrative tasks as their main reason for leaving teaching. Document preparation, report submissions, and sudden data requests with tight deadlines consumed their time and created a toxic work environment. Brandenburg et al. (2024) support this, noting that heavy workload and lack of drive teachers away.

Slow career progression and limited training opportunities also pushed teachers to leave. They described teaching as stagnant and repetitive, with weekends consumed by lesson plans and reports. Wangchuk and Dorji (2020) confirm that unequal access to training and unclear promotion pathways lead to teacher attrition.

In contrast, participants viewed the uniformed service as offering clearer career advancement. Progression followed structured pathways with mandatory training and schooling. Alam and Asmawi (2023) identified stagnant promotion routes as a key reason for leaving teaching, matching the participants' views.

Better pay and benefits also drove the career shift. Participants found teaching income insufficient for their workload, while the uniformed service offered stable pay that increased with rank and years of service. Belida et al. (2024) note that better compensation is a major reason Filipinos change careers. Work-life balance was another strong attraction. Teaching demanded long hours and weekend work, leaving little time for rest or family. The uniformed service, especially the BFP's one-week-on, one-week-off schedule, provided clearer boundaries. Belida et al. (2024) emphasized that work-life balance drives career change decisions.

The transition came with difficulties. Physical training was intense and unexpected, requiring fitness levels far beyond classroom teaching. Queiros et al. (2020) reported that uniformed recruits face strenuous drills leading to fatigue and stress.

Emotional strain and self-doubt were also significant. Some participants wanted to quit as early as the second day of training. Sanfilippo et al. (2023) explain that emotional complexity is natural during career transitions.

Adapting to the chain of command proved challenging. Coming from an autonomous profession, participants struggled with following orders without question. Brewer (2018) stresses that career changes affect routine, identity, and well-being.

Training was designed to reshape their civilian mindset. Resisting orders was no longer tolerated, contrasting with teaching's permissive atmosphere. Participants internalized discipline and respect for hierarchy. Courtois et al. (2024) report that career transitions require professional reconstruction.

Despite the career shift, teacher identity persisted. A BJMP participant noted that working with persons deprived of liberty involves coaching and values formation, applying teaching skills. Yang (2025) confirms that professional identity remains strong even after the career transition.

Lastly, participants faced mixed social reactions. Some encountered judgment from those who expected them to stay in teaching due to their credentials. However, those with supportive families experienced greater acceptance, suggesting that personal networks matter in career transitions.

Conclusions

The study found that the primary factors that led former teachers to leave the teaching profession and move into uniformed service were rooted in both personal motivations and frustrations with the educational system. Their discontent came from an excessive administrative burden, an overwhelming amount of paperwork, emotional fatigue, and scarce opportunities for career advancement within the teaching field. The participants' transition was characterized by considerable difficulties and periods of uncertainty. They faced physical challenges, rigorous training, emotional distress, and the necessity of adjusting to a strict rank-based system and chain of command. Feelings of doubt were frequent, especially during the initial phases of adapting to their new roles.

As to career fulfillment and professional development, the participants generally described experiencing greater satisfaction in the uniformed service than in their previous teaching roles. This was due to their perception of enhanced job security, a more defined career path, and clearer, more concrete opportunities for upward mobility within the uniformed sector. The personal narratives and lived experiences of the participants showed that their career transition was more than just a change in occupation it was a transformative journey. Although their professional roles changed, their identity as educators did not completely vanish. Rather, fundamental teaching values such as mentoring, guiding, and shaping character were adapted and woven into their responsibilities within the uniformed service, enabling them to continue serving the public in a meaningful way.

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