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Shifting Career Paths: A Phenomenological Study of Education Graduates' Experiences Transitioning to Alternative Professions

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A B S T R A C T

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of education graduates who pursued professions outside teaching. Specifically, it examined the factors influencing their career shifts, the challenges encountered during the transition, and the insights that educational institutions may derive from these experiences. Six education graduates from the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) currently employed in non-teaching professions participated in in-depth interviews. Findings revealed that career shifts were influenced by burnout and stress, financial concerns, limited professional growth, personal interests, and better employment opportunities. Participants also experienced challenges related to skill adjustment, emotional struggles, job uncertainty, and workplace adaptation. The study highlights the importance of flexible curricula, career guidance, and support systems that prepare graduates for diverse career pathways

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession has long been regarded as the natural career destination for graduates of teacher education programs. However, contemporary labor market realities reveal a growing divergence between educational preparation and actual career trajectories. Increasingly, education graduates are pursuing professions beyond the classroom, reflecting broader changes in employment opportunities, professional aspirations, and workforce demands. This trend challenges the traditional assumption that a degree in education inevitably leads to a teaching career and highlights the need to understand how graduates navigate alternative professional pathways.

Career transitions have become a defining feature of modern employment. Sullivan and Al Ariss (2019) describe career transitions as movements between occupational roles shaped by both individual agency and changing labor market conditions. As employment environments become increasingly dynamic, graduates are expected to adapt to emerging opportunities and reconsider conventional career pathways. Within teacher education, this reality is particularly evident. Suryani and George (2021) found that many teacher education graduates choose not to enter or remain in the teaching profession due to unfavorable training experiences, low compensation, heavy workloads, inadequate welfare provisions, and unclear career advancement opportunities. These conditions have contributed to the growing number of education graduates seeking careers in sectors unrelated to teaching.

The Philippine labor market reflects a similar pattern. BusinessWorld (2023) reported that nearly one-third of Filipino workers were considering changing careers within a year, demonstrating a growing willingness to explore alternative professions. Career transitions are increasingly viewed not merely as responses to dissatisfaction but as strategic decisions aimed at achieving better financial security, professional growth, and long-term career fulfillment. Such developments suggest that career mobility has become an important aspect of contemporary professional life, including among graduates whose academic preparation was originally intended for a specific profession.

The phenomenon is particularly relevant in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where teacher education programs continue to produce a substantial number of graduates each year. Although efforts have been made to address teacher shortages through recruitment initiatives, opportunities within the educational sector remain highly competitive. As a result, many qualified education graduates are unable to secure teaching positions and subsequently pursue careers in other professions. Despite the growing visibility of this career pathway, the experiences of education graduates who successfully transition into non-teaching occupations remain largely undocumented within the regional context.

While existing studies have examined career mobility, graduate employability, and teacher attrition, limited attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences of education graduates who intentionally pursue alternative professions. Consequently, little is known about how these individuals make sense of their career decisions, navigate transition-related

challenges, and reconstruct their professional identities beyond teaching. By focusing on education graduates in BARMM who have established careers outside the educational sector, this study contributes a context-specific perspective to the literature on career transitions. The findings provide insights into an underexplored population and offer evidence that may inform curriculum enhancement, career guidance services, and workforce development initiatives. Through a phenomenological exploration of their experiences, this study examined the factors that influenced education graduates to pursue professions outside teaching, the challenges they encountered during their career transitions, and the insights that may be drawn from their career journeys

LITERATURE REVIEW

In understanding the shifting career paths of education graduates transitioning into alternative professions, this study drew on three major theoretical lenses whose original proponents laid the foundation for examining human experience, identity, and change – Existential Phenomenology, Career Transition Theory, and Narrative Identity Theory.

Existential Theory

Existential theory, rooted in the works of Edmund Husserl and expanded by Martin Heidegger, provided a lens for interpreting the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals.

As cited by Nabilah et al. (2025), education graduates grappled with questions of self-efficacy, life purpose, and personal aspirations, highlighting intrinsic motivations and emotional tensions that shaped their professional shift. The findings emphasized that career change is not merely a practical decision but a meaning-laden experience, aligning closely with the existential phenomenological lens of the present study. Through this lens, the current research recognized career shifting as an existential journey where education graduates negotiated personal meaning, identity, and aspirations in their transition toward alternative professional roles.

Career Transition Theory

Career Transition Theory, developed by Nancy Schlossberg (1981) as cited by Guballa et al. (2024), in their research on psychology graduates transitioning to professional roles revealed the presence of barriers such as limited job opportunities, delayed licensure, and emotional stress. It has been also highlighted the coping strategies such as upskilling, peer support, and personal resilience. These findings reflected the structured approach proposed by Career Transition Theory, that demonstrated how individuals navigated both internal and external factors during major career shifts.

Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative Identity Theory, introduced by Dan McAdams (1993), emphasized how people constructed meaning and identity through personal life stories.

As cited by Diokno and Erojo (2025), education graduates who chose non-teaching pathways often framed their decisions through personal narratives shaped by family expectations, societal perceptions of the teaching profession, and evolving personal goals. These helped them justify their choices and establish new identity directions, underscoring the integral role of storytelling in career shifts.

In general, anchoring the study to Existential Phenomenology, Career Transition Theory, and Narrative Identity Theory enables a rich, thorough understanding of education graduates' shifting career paths.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of education graduates who pursued professions outside the teaching field. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' motivations, challenges, and meanings attached to their career transitions Annamalai et al. (2022).

The study involved six education graduates residing in Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, BARMM, who had passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) but were employed in non-teaching professions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The sample size was consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies, which typically involve a small number of information-rich participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide. The interviews explored participants' reasons for pursuing alternative professions, the challenges they encountered during their career transitions, and the insights they gained from their experiences. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. Significant statements were extracted from the transcripts, meanings were formulated, and related meanings were grouped into categories and themes. These themes were synthesized into a comprehensive description of the participants' experiences. To ensure credibility, the findings were returned to the participants for validation and confirmation of the researchers' interpretations (Wirihana et al., 2018).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. All information gathered was treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for research purposes.

RESEARCH RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study based on the lived experiences of education graduates who pursued professions outside the teaching field. The data gathered through semi-structured interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. Through a systematic analysis of participants' narratives, significant statements were identified, meanings were formulated, and themes were developed to capture the essence of their career transition experiences.

The analysis focused on understanding the factors that influenced education graduates to pursue alternative professions, the challenges they encountered during their career transitions, and the insights that educational institutions and workforce development sectors may derive from their experiences. The findings are presented thematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

1. Factors Influencing Education Graduates to Pursue Professions Outside Teaching

The findings revealed that education graduates pursued professions outside teaching due to a combination of personal, professional, and economic factors. Five major themes emerged from the participants' responses: teaching burnout and stress, financial reasons for leaving teaching, limited growth opportunities in the teaching profession, career choices based on personal interests, and support and opportunities outside the teaching field.

Participants shared that the demands associated with teaching, including workload pressures and emotional exhaustion, influenced their decision to seek alternative careers. Financial concerns also played a significant role, as some participants perceived that the other professions offered greater financial stability and more attractive career prospects. Furthermore, participants expressed concerns regarding limited opportunities for career advancement within the teaching profession, prompting them to explore occupations that provided broader professional growth.

Personal interests and long-term aspirations likewise influenced career decisions. Several participants revealed that their chosen professions were more closely aligned with their passions, skills, and personal goals. In addition, support from family members, peers, and professional networks encouraged them to pursue opportunities beyond the educational sector. These findings suggest that career transitions among education graduates are shaped by multiple interconnected factors rather than a single motivation.

2. Challenges Encountered by Education Graduates During Career Transition

Despite successfully establishing careers outside teaching, participants encountered several challenges throughout their transition process. The analysis revealed five major themes: adjusting to new skills and work demands, emotional struggles during transition, balancing work and family responsibilities, job uncertainty and hiring challenges, and adapting to a new workplace culture.

Participants described difficulties adjusting to professional environments that differed significantly from their academic preparation. Many had to acquire new competencies, learn unfamiliar procedures, and adapt to different workplace expectations. Emotional challenges, including uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt, were also commonly experienced, particularly during the initial stages of their career transitions.

Additionally, balancing personal responsibilities with professional demands emerged as a challenge for some participants. Others experienced difficulties related to employment opportunities, including competition during hiring processes and concerns regarding job stability. Participants also highlighted the need to adapt to organizational cultures, communication styles, and workplace norms that were different from those commonly associated with the teaching profession. These experiences demonstrate the complexities involved in transitioning from one professional pathway to another.

3. Insights and Recommendations Drawn from the Experiences of Education Graduates

The findings generated valuable insights regarding the preparation and support of education graduates for diverse career pathways. Four major themes emerged: the transferability of teaching skills, the need for a more flexible curriculum, the importance of career support services, and career shifting as a pathway for personal and professional growth.

Participants emphasized that skills acquired through teacher education, such as communication, leadership, organization, and problem-solving, remained highly relevant in their current professions. This suggests that teacher education programs develop competencies that extend beyond classroom instruction. The findings also highlighted the importance of curriculum flexibility in preparing graduates for changing labor market demands and diverse employment opportunities.

Furthermore, participants underscored the value of career guidance, employability training, and support systems that can assist graduates in making informed career decisions. Many viewed their career transitions not as failures or deviations from their educational background, but as opportunities for growth, learning, and self-discovery. These insights indicate that educational institutions may benefit from adopting broader perspectives on graduate success and career development.

Overall, the findings reveal that career transitions among education graduates are influenced by various personal, professional, and socioeconomic factors. Although participants encountered challenges during their transitions, they demonstrated adaptability and resilience in navigating alternative career pathways. Their experiences provide valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to enhance graduate preparedness, employability, and career support initiatives

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight that career transitions among education graduates are influenced by a complex interaction of professional, personal, and socioeconomic factors. The participants' experiences demonstrate that pursuing a profession outside teaching is not merely a response to limited employment opportunities but a multifaceted decision shaped by workplace realities, personal aspirations, and evolving career goals.

One of the most prominent findings was the influence of teaching burnout and stress on participants' career decisions. The participants described how heavy workloads, emotional demands, and work-related pressures contributed to their decision to seek alternative professions. This finding supports the work of Suryani and George (2021), who found that unfavorable working conditions, excessive workload, and limited professional satisfaction discourage many teachers education graduates from pursuing long-term teaching careers. The finding further suggests that career transitions may be viewed as a coping response to professional environments perceived as unsustainable or insufficiently rewarding.

Financial considerations also emerged as a significant factor influencing career shifts. Participants perceived that alternative profession offered greater financial stability and opportunities for economic advancement. This finding aligns with Liamzon (2023), who noted that many professionals pursue career transitions to improve their earning potential and achieve greater financial security. The result highlights the importance of economic realities in career decision-making and suggests that compensation and career incentives remain important considerations for education graduates when evaluating professional opportunities.

Another important finding was the perception of limited opportunities for professional growth within the teaching profession. Participants expressed a desire for broader career advancement and professional development opportunities, which motivated them to explore alternative career paths. This finding is consistent with the studies of Madigan and Kim (2021) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017), which emphasized that limited opportunities for advancement can negatively affect professional commitment and job satisfaction. The finding suggests that graduates are more likely to remain in a profession when they perceive clear pathways for growth and long-term career development.

The study also revealed that personal interests and career aspirations significantly influenced participants’ decisions. Although they completed teacher education programs, several participants discovered that their interests and goals were better aligned with professions outside teaching. This finding supports the work of Sumicad et al. (2024), and Rudolph et al. (2017), who emphasized that career decisions evolve over time as individuals reassess their aspirations, values, and competencies. The result demonstrates that career pathways are increasingly dynamic and may extend beyond one's original field of academic specialization.

In addition, support systems and exposure to opportunities outside teaching influenced participants' career transitions. Family members, peers, professional networks, and available employment opportunities encouraged participants to explore alternative professions. This finding corroborates the studies of Abas et al. (2020), Akkermans et al. (2018), and Jackson and Bridgstock (2021), which highlighted the role of social networks and external opportunities in shaping career development. The result indicates that career decisions are often influenced by both individual agency and external social factors.

The findings further revealed that participants encountered several challenges during their transition to non-teaching professions. Difficulties in adapting to new skills, workplace expectations, and professional responsibilities demonstrate the challenges associated with entering unfamiliar occupational environments. This finding supports Chan (2023) and Anwar et al. (2025), who emphasized that graduates often experience adjustment difficulties when workplace requirements differ from their academic preparation. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptability by acquiring new competencies and adjusting to changing professional demands.

Emotional struggles, including uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt, were also evident during the transition process. Consistent with Crispin et al. (2024) and Castro (2024), the findings suggest that career transitions involve significant psychological adjustments as individuals reconstruct their professional identities and adapt to new roles. However, these experiences also contributed to the development of resilience and confidence among participants.

The findings additionally provide important implications for educational institutions and workforce development initiatives. Participants recognized that competencies acquired through teacher education, including communication, leadership, organization, and problem-solving skills, remained highly applicable in their current professions. This supports the findings of Sumicad et al. (2024) who emphasized the value of transferable skills across different employment sectors. The result suggests that teacher education programs contribute not only to classroom readiness but also to broader employability and career adaptability.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the need for a more flexible curriculum and stronger career support services. Their experiences suggest that educational institutions may benefit from integrating employability skills, career exploration opportunities, and industry-responsive learning experiences into teacher education programs. These observations are consistent with the recommendations of Bautista et al. (2023) who emphasized the importance of curriculum responsiveness and career development support in preparing graduates for diverse professional pathways.

Overall, the findings indicate that career shifting among education graduates should not be viewed solely as a departure from the teaching profession but as a reflection of changing labor market realities, evolving professional aspirations, and the adaptability of graduates in pursuing meaningful career opportunities. The experiences of the participants demonstrate that career transitions, while challenging, can serve as pathways for professional growth, personal development, and expanded career possibilities

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that education graduates pursue professions outside teaching due to a combination of burnout, financial concerns, limited career opportunities, personal interests, and external support systems. Although participants encountered challenges related to skill adjustment, emotional adaptation, and workplace integration, they successfully navigated these transitions through resilience and the application of transferable skills developed during their educational training.

Based on these findings, teacher education institutions may strengthen career guidance programs, incorporate transferable skills development into the curriculum, and provide greater exposure to diverse career opportunities. Educational policymakers and workforce development sectors may also consider initiatives that support graduates in making informed career decisions and adapting to evolving labor market demands.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study focused on six education graduates from Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, who pursued professions outside teaching. Consequently, the findings represent the experiences of a specific group and may not be generalized to all education graduates. Future studies may involve larger and more diverse participant groups from different regions to explore similarities and differences in career transition experiences. Researchers may also examine the long-term career outcomes of education graduates in non-teaching professions and investigate how teacher education programs can better prepare graduates for multiple career pathways.

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