

Urban-originated English Language Teachers Longevity: What Keeps Them in Rural Schools in Sabah?

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Abstract: The shortage of trained and qualified English language teachers in rural schools has always been a significant issue in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, due to the higher proportion of rural areas. Various factors have been associated with teachers' reluctance to serve in rural schools. Nevertheless, several urban-originated teachers are recorded to have shown persistence in serving rural schools. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons and contributing factors behind their long-term longevity in rural schools. The lived experiences of ten teachers were explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data gleaned were thematically analysed following Ryan and Bernard's (2000) recommended procedures. Results suggest that even participating teachers work in a challenging English teaching environment; this has not been a sufficient drive for them to depart from rural schools. Their longevity is attributed to perceived social support and students factor. Furthermore, a blended concept of positive emotions was remarked as a fuel-source of teachers' long-term persistence in rural schools. The contributions and implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: English, language teachers, longevity, rural schools, Sabah

1. Introduction

The prominent issue of low retention of trained and certified English language teachers to remain in rural schools has been well-documented in literature. This phenomenon is continuously giving negative implications to destitute and disadvantaged students in rural areas. The struggle to retain English language teachers is not exclusive to Malaysia, but similar situations have also been documented in other countries such as Indonesia (Febriana et al., 2018) and China (Xuehui, 2018). Handal et al. (2018) remarked that many of these developing countries are experiencing a similar dilemma, and the shortage of rural school teachers, especially the qualified ones, has become a global phenomenon.

In Malaysia, the shortage of English language teachers in rural schools is commonly linked to teacher burnout, high teacher turnover rates (Aziz, 2015), and lack of high-quality teachers in rural schools (Cheng et al., 2016). English language teachers are more interested in serving schools in urban

areas with higher socioeconomic status (Aziz, 2015), making teacher retention a never-ending issue in rural schools. This situation is particularly severe in poorer states such as Sabah due to the large proportion of rural areas compared to other states (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Most research in the education field has focused more on identifying factors for high teacher turnover rates (Aziz, 2015) and its relation to English's low performance (Cheng et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a lack of research has paid attention to those who remain in rural schools. Interestingly, the data obtained from the Sabah Education Department (2016) revealed that there are several teachers whose place of origin is in urban areas which have remained serving rural schools for more than three years, making this a prospective area to explore and gain a better understanding of the reasons for their longevity. The results may offer insights and enlightening ideas in retaining English language teachers in rural schools. For this purpose, hence, this study explores urban-originated English language teachers' lived experiences who persist in rural Sabah secondary schools. This study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What reasons do the teachers give to remain serving in rural schools?
2. What circumstances, factors, and/or experiences influence their longevity in rural schools?

2. Literature Review

Retaining quality teachers is crucial in ensuring quality education for students. Quality teachers can be defined as motivated individuals who display competence in classroom teaching and produce strong students' academic performance (Aziz, 2015). This quality can only be obtained through years of teaching experience. It is regarded as an advantage for schools to have high-quality teachers who are motivated and committed as they are the influential empirical factors for school effectiveness, teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, and success of education and schooling (Hassan, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, retaining quality English teachers has been an unrelenting issue for rural schools. This is due to the high teacher turnover rates in rural schools with large percentages of students from low socioeconomic communities (Aziz, 2015). The constant fluctuation of teachers coming in and out of rural schools has adversely affected students' learning. This turnover trend has a negative impact fiscally on rural educational settings. In 2010, the World Bank's report attributed low students' performance of rural schools to low retention of high-quality teachers in rural schools.

Aziz (2015) noted a hypothetical assumption that rural schools face difficulties to retain quality English teachers is due to their departure after only serving for a few short years. It is a significant loss for rural schools when they move out to urban schools and bring together their teaching experience and expertise. The most apparent reason for teachers' departure is the burnout phenomenon. The existing literature disclosed that the level of burnout among English language teachers is significantly high (Mukundan et al., 2015) as they experience a high level of stressors in rural schools. Although the stressors are generally substantial to all teachers, they are particularly intense for those serving in rural schools (Aziz, 2015). Burnout among teachers has always been an imminent issue due to its profession's nature, where it involves intense interactions with other people. Of all burnout factors, stress from teaching has been identified as the salient reason for many teachers, affecting teachers' inner feelings and performance. Ideally, the ability to deal with stress is crucial for teachers in teacher retention. Researchers who addressed this burnout phenomenon argued that teachers must become resilient when facing difficulties carrying their duties. However, in consideration of the rural environment, English language teachers face a greater tendency to be drained than the other teachers in urban schools, resulting in an increment in teacher turnover rate. This situation proves that teacher turnover is the primary cause of teacher shortage rather than teacher retirement. The fact corresponds with many rural teachers moving to and serving urban schools is well documented.

Consequently, the cycle of receiving inexperienced novice teachers in rural schools continues to ensue. This is supported by the data obtained from Sabah Education Department (2016), which revealed that most English teachers serving in rural schools are novice teachers who have just graduated less than two years. These inexperienced young novice teachers contribute to the lack of teacher quality (Aziz, 2015; Alice & Zuraidah, 2020) due to being more vulnerable to both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation lead to burnout (Mukundan *et al.*, 2015). Novice teachers often do not feel adequately

prepared for the challenges in their first few years of teaching (Paronjodi et al., 2017) and need more support and experience to build up their quality. In contrast with experienced teachers, novice teachers had not developed a plan for interpreting and dealing with what goes on during their teaching, nor do they have strong pedagogical knowledge or instructional routines that they could depend on. Furthermore, with the shortage of qualified English teachers in rural schools, other teachers must take over the responsibility to teach the subject (Sabah Education Department, 2016). This situation renders the teaching and learning of English ineffective (Cheng et al., 2016) as other teachers have to bear the responsibility without proper training and support (Sabah Education Department, 2016).

The lack of quality teachers is indeed one of the barriers influencing the English subject's overall performance in those schools. The difference between teachers' quality in urban and rural schools reveals that urban schools have better advantages to enlist more highly qualified teachers. The turnover trend has further widened the disparity between urban and rural schools (Aziz, 2015). However, a question that arises from this situation is whether rural schools could ever keep their teachers motivated to continue serving to maintain academic quality for an extended period. It is imperative to attend to this issue because of its implications on students' learning and achievement (Cheng et al., 2016). The teacher factor is one of the critical determiners in rural students' English language performance (Richards, 2017). Hence, learning from the lived experiences of those who persist in rural schools would explain why and how, and therefore may offer additional insights to retain teachers to continue serving rural schools.

2.1 Underpinning theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a theory widely used to explain developmental changes in which individuals are undergoing the course of their lives (Bandura, 1986), is useful to the present study to consider teachers' decision to remain serving rural schools. The primary construct in this theory is that each individual is an agent that produces experiences and establishes incidents. SCT emphasises that human behaviours are shaped based on triadic reciprocal determinism, which means that the personal, behavioural, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional and reciprocal way. In educational research, SCT has been widely applied to understand classroom motivation, students' learning, and achievement.

SCT is a view of human functions, which stresses on human agency and a dynamic interplay between personal, behavioural, and social factors in human change and adaptation. Instead of being just shaped by environments or inner forces, the theory suggests that individuals are self-developing, self-regulating, self-reflecting, and proactive. Notably, the human agency operates within three modes, individual, proxy, and collective agencies. Each individual has a system that allows them to apply self-control measures on thoughts, feelings, motivations, and actions. This system provides a self-reflection mechanism and set sub-function to respond to, manage, and evaluate the behaviour when reacting to the environment. For example, the interpretation of achievements stimulates an individual to act in self-provide information through self-reactiveness, individuals' ability to construct and regulate appropriate behaviours; and self-reflectiveness; individuals' ability to reflect and evaluate the soundness of their cognitions and behaviours. This process affects self-confidence and implements thoughtful and reliable action under the requirements of the environment.

Bandura (1986) argued that through self-reflection, each individual could assess the experience and mentality. Self-reflection has a significant impact on the confidence of individuals to form new thoughts and behaviour. Consequently, individual behaviour is predictable through thoughts of individual trust in his ability, compared to the actual results. However, this does not mean that individuals can perform tasks beyond their capabilities by only believing that they can do them. Ability in a task requires harmony between self-confidence with knowledge and skills. Even the self-perception of an individual's ability helps determine what can be done with the knowledge and skills. Through self-efficacy beliefs, people can exercise control over events that affect their lives. Thus, the individuals' self-efficacy enables them to assess the ability to reflect on themselves, the surrounding environment, behaviour, and actions in the future. In short, the personal factor in SCT concerns the cognitive, affective, and biological events of a person. The present study explores further reasons for teachers' longevity and the factors that influence their decision to remain in rural schools through their self-reflection from the SCT lens.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study explores ten urban-originated English language teachers who have been serving low-performing rural schools for more than three years in Sabah, Malaysia. In exploring the lived experiences of this unique group of teachers in rural schools, a phenomenological case study design was utilised. By definition, phenomenological research aims to examine the lived experiences of a specific group of individuals to best capture and describe their perceived realities within a particular context (Moustakas, 1994), while a case study explores a phenomenon through one or more cases within a circumscribed setting or context (Merriam, 2009). This phenomenological approach, combined with the case study approach, enables the researchers to make sense or to come to understand the complex human experiences and “*the essence and the underlying structure of a phenomenon*” (Merriam, 2009, p.23). The case study provides a detailed account and analysis of cases and may involve an event, process, object, or person. It also offers chances to identify what complex events or characteristics exist within a specific system. Nieswiadomy (1993) pointed out that a case study approach is suitable to be used for engaging, in-depth examinations of people or groups of people or an institution, and it is imperative for the researchers to be interested in the meaning of experiences to the subjects themselves, rather than in generalising results to other groups of people. Utilising a case study also enables the researchers to explore a given uniqueness to reveal a phenomenon that may not be accessible (Merriam, 2009). It allows researchers to understand the phenomenon through participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences and search for those experiences’ roots (Moustakas, 1994). The case study also enabled the researcher to develop upon existing theories, build new theories, and challenge existing theories. A case study’s findings can facilitate an understanding of reality’s complexities that directly relate to readers’ routine and daily experiences. Therefore, a case study as a particular style of educational research is appropriate for investigating the concept of English teaching in a specific context, as for this study, the case of rural Sabah secondary schools.

In order to seek insight into the research question in the present study regarding how the participating teachers go about constructing the meaning of their persistency through their lived experiences, it would be impossible to break up the phenomenon of teaching the English language to rural students from the institutional and instructional context of an English programme. In other words, the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is blurred. The broader phenomenon—the perception of teaching English in rural secondary schools is anchored in a programmatic context and thus forms a bounded system. For this particular study, the English teaching phenomenon in rural secondary schools in Sabah was chosen as the selected case. Thus, to explore how participants describe their lived experiences, it was best to examine a single setting or context so that rich data can be gathered from various sources.

3.2 Researchers’ role

Qualitative research is interpretive and requires the researcher to recognise biases, personal interests, values, and the methods used to gain entry into the research site (Creswell, 2003); thus, the researchers become the instrument in a qualitative study. On the other hand, Patton (2002) emphasised that information about the researchers should be included in a qualitative report that describes researcher experience and training, personal relationships to the teachers and topic studied, and the perspective that the researcher brings to the subject. These are essential elements that align the standards of quality and define the researchers’ role in a qualitative study.

All researchers were trained in the TESL field and had experienced teaching in rural secondary schools in Sabah and Sarawak states for a few years; thus, it provides familiarity with the research topic, setting, and the participants’ viewpoints. Nevertheless, the basis of the researchers’ role in this study is governed by the desire to understand participants’ lived experiences through their viewpoints on the teaching of English in rural schools. To accurately describe participants’ life experiences, a bracketing procedure was conducted. Bracketing is a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires intentional putting aside researchers’ repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values, preconceived

notions, and experiences about the research topic or what is known about the phenomenon prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Before meeting with the participants, the researchers took time for reflection dialogues, producing a bracketing journal, and bringing reflexivity into consciousness while preparing the final report. These conscious efforts were made to ensure the validity of the data collection and analysis process. Furthermore, because the researchers performed data analysis on their own rather than employing a computer program to do so, member checking and peer debriefing were utilised to assist in pointing out any slanting that may have been overlooked.

3.3 Research sites

Ten rural secondary schools from seven districts in Sabah were chosen as the sites for this study. The schools were selected based on the Sabah Education Department (2016) list and categorised as public schools located in rural areas and serving mostly average and low-income communities. This study focuses on rural secondary schools because of the potential differences in teaching and learning environments from urban secondary schools. As discussed earlier, existing literature found that multiple factors contributing to burnout among teachers are predominantly influential in rural schools (Aziz, 2015). This study was further bordered on schools identified as low-performing schools in English subject in SPM in 2014-2018. Information on these schools' performance was sought from the Sabah Education Department during the site selection process, and each school was given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Table 1 shows the profile of the research sites.

Table 1. Profile of Research Sites

School Profile	Hostel	Year of Establishment	Teaching staff	English language teachers	Total students	ESL teacher - student ratio
SS1	Yes	2002	95	11	1241	1: 113
SS2	Yes	1975	148	17	2137	1: 126
SS3	Yes	2003	48	8	637	1: 80
SS4	Yes	2011	34	4	368	1: 92
SS5	No	1995	95	9	1062	1: 118
SS6	No	1919	67	8	834	1: 104
SS7	No	1990	85	11	982	1: 90
SS8	Yes	1988	92	9	943	1: 105
SS9	Yes	1977	65	7	582	1: 83
SS10	No	1953	61	9	828	1: 92

3.4 Participants

The methods adopted within qualitative research reflect the belief that social phenomena could best be studied through small-scale research to better understand the issue under consideration (Silverman, 2000). Concerning the underlying philosophy of phenomenology, the sample was chosen purposively to gain insights into the lived experiences of a group of teachers working within similar geographic areas to form a mostly homogenous sample. However, it is acknowledged that the sample's homogeneity is indeed a complex and challenging issue to resolve. Individual differences mean inclusive homogeneity can never be reached and guaranteed. However, this study's view emphasised that selected participants should represent a perspective rather than a population. Purposive sampling was used to select potential teachers to participate in this study. Participants of this study were selected based on those who met the following criteria:

- i) possess TESL or TESOL qualifications
- ii) has been teaching for more than three years in rural secondary schools during data collection
- iii) place of origin is located in urban areas

After obtaining the teachers' list fitting the study's criteria, an invitation letter was sent to each of the teachers to participate in the study. The letter contains a brief introduction of the researchers, a short description of the research, and an invitation for the prospective teacher to consider taking part in the study. Teachers willing to participate were asked to sign a consent form to document informed consent for participation in the study. All teachers were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Ten teachers participated in this study, a sampling number within the phenomenological parameters of five to twenty-five participants suggested by Creswell (2003). The participants consisted of one male and nine females teaching in the selected rural secondary schools during the study. The selection of these participants was based on these criteria as they could provide rich information about the phenomenon being studied. Prospective teachers were solicited during formal and informal meetings and courses and ended when the data reached the saturation level, in which the data gathered was able to answer research questions. The ability to gain additional new information had been accomplished, and further coding was no longer feasible. Table 2 lists the demographic profiles of the teachers.

Table 2. Demographic profiles of participating teachers

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Qualifications	Teaching Experience	Experience in the current school	School
T1	Late 20's	Female	B. Ed (TESL)	7 years	5 years	SS1
T2	Mid 20's	Female	B. Ed (TESL)	4 years	4 years	SS2
T3	Mid 20's	Female	B. Ed (TESL)	4 years	4 years	SS3
T4	Late 20's	Female	B. Ed (TESOL)	7 years	4 years	SS4
T5	Late 30's	Female	B. Edu (TESL)	16 years	14 years	SS5
T6	Mid 40's	Female	B. Edu (TESL)	22 years	22 years	SS6
T7	Mid 40's	Male	B. Ed (TESL) M. Edu (TESL)	25 years	16 years	SS7
T8	Late 30's	Female	B. Edu (TESL) Hons	17 years	16 years	SS8
T9	Late 20's	Female	B. Ed (TESL)	6 years	6 years	SS9
T10	Mid 30's	Female	B. Sc. Edu (TESL) Hons.	14 years	10 years	SS10

3.5 Research method and data collection procedures

In-depth semi-structured interview data were used to illuminate self-reflection reasons behind participants' longevity and the factors influencing their persistency. In-depth interviews allow for collecting rich, personalised information and obtaining a personal perspective about participants' outward behaviours and what is in and on the participants' minds (Merriam, 2009). It provides opportunities for researchers to probe follow-up questions to clarify unclear responses to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Interviews also allow them to share their opinions, thoughts, views, and experiences in a direct verbal statement that provides insights into how they interpret the phenomenon and some piece of the world.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were the primary and dominant data collection method. Besides, electronic communication mediums such as email and WhatsApp application were used to clarify ambiguity and unclear responses. A list of questions served as an interview guide was prepared before interview sessions validated by an expert. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to describe their experiences and justify their actions and decisions. All participants were interviewed

following a semi-structured format that presented a conversational tone but focused on the research questions. However, depending on the participants' responses, the questions were flexibly amended or veered to answer research questions. All sessions were conducted by addressing semi-structured questions covering the main topics guided by the research questions. All questions were self-developed by the researchers within the study context with reference to interview questions from related previous studies.

Each interview session was intended to last for one hour per participant, but it lasted thirty to seventy-five minutes per session, depending on the feedback given after each question. During the interviews, non-verbal communication and memo on the interpretation of their responses were also recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and labelled with pseudonyms, interview sessions, and line numbers. Additionally, field notes were reviewed immediately after the session to ensure accurate interpretation. It provides opportunities for researchers to develop follow-up questions to clarify unclear responses to avoid any form of assumption and misinterpretation.

4. Data analysis

The data were then analysed using thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Thematic analysis is chosen as it focuses more on displaying patterns or themes in the data. The data were analysed inductively, in which the themes identified are closely related to the data itself. By doing this, it allows the data coding process to expand according to the research questions. The inductive thematic analysis also tends to analyse themes in detail without giving attention to the previous studies' related themes. The selection of thematic data analysis fits the theoretical orientations of this study in the assumption that gathered data represents the reality of teachers' self-reflection. Data gathered were analysed based on Ryan and Bernard's (2000) six steps of thematic analysis, namely familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Atlas.ti software was used to assist data management and analysis. The following table 3 is the illustration of thematic analysis phases applied in this study:

Table 3. Thematic analysis table

Phase	Process	Description
1	Familiarising with the data	Reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting data features systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Reviewing themes	Checking in the themes work concerning the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine each theme's specifics and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Qualitative data analysis is an evolving process involving analytic and systematic data evaluation. Through data analysis, it allows the researchers to seek meaning systematically. To complete the data analysis, strategies to establish quality, substantiate data accuracy, and verification of methods, meanings, and data interpretations was carried out. The data analysis procedures, verification procedures, and procedures to establish quality help the researcher decide whether the study is credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. In this study, environmental triangulation was used to verify, corroborate and validate evidence, and ensure interpretive validity of data. As a flexible way to think about validity, triangulation emphasizes the researchers' embodiment as the primary tool to develop rigour through data credibility. Data was sourced from different research sites. The results described a similar pattern of data was obtained even though it was sourced from various cases and sites, strengthening the validity of the data. Besides, member checks (Merriam, 2009) were conducted with the participants to further establish the analysis's trustworthiness. Peer debriefing (Merriam, 2009) was also used in this study to establish the reliability of the analysis. In addition to data validation, a qualitative researcher colleague was enlisted to review transcripts of the interview and develop themes to compare with those identified by the researchers. Peer debriefing helps clarify interpretations of the data, consider alternative explanations, and defend emergent themes to substantiate results.

5. Results

This study aims to explore the reasons urban-originated English language teachers' longevity in rural schools. Fascinatingly, being in a rural environment was not recognised as a factor in remaining in the schools. Although the participants were invited to explore their longevity in rural schools, their explanations intertwined with other elements in their descriptions. The results are grounded in the SCT, explaining how teachers' behaviours are formed based on the dynamic interplay between personal, behavioural and social factors in human change and adaptation. The results also imply that the participants are self-developing, self-regulating, self-reflecting, and proactive and not just affected by environments or inner forces. Four themes have emerged from the data analysis, which are: (i) unwavering commitment, (ii) passion and enthusiasm for teaching, (iii) inspired by family members, and (iv) social and religious obligations. However, it should be noted that even though each theme was analysed separately, the themes, in reality, do not stand alone but are interrelated to one another.

5.1 Emergent theme 1: Unwavering commitment

When asked about why they persist in rural schools, many participants revealed that the main reason is due to their commitment built over the years. This commitment reflected the meaning of being teachers in fulfilling the needs of rural students. They indicated that teaching was not just a profession for them. Instead, it is more of an obligation to help students have a brighter future. The unwavering commitment is not only placed on students' academic achievement but also in other fields. For example, T1 described her commitment to helping rural students with great hope.

T1: I want to see at least one of my students become successful in whatever ways. And so far, I didn't see that, so, I'm still waiting. I want to see at least one student become successful based on the way I'm teaching. I want to see that, I haven't seen that yet, so, I'm still waiting.

T1 wished to see at least one student under her care be successful in any field, but there has not been any so far. Thus, she took it as a challenge to work harder to achieve that goal. She believed that such satisfaction from a successful endeavour would give more meaning to her life as a teacher. Other participants like T3 and T10 described their commitment as the result of successful teaching experiences they had previously.

T3: Hmm, because like I said before, I don't want to be a teacher kan? Lepas belajar apa semua, I started to think that being a teacher is not bad at all. Of course lah kan? We educate people, we give something to them and then kalau dia orang berjaya.

Deep down inside kita rasa macam very happy. Macam, dia memang, I am the teacher, but actually, they teach me tau. Ha, so macam tu lah.

T10: The experience that I gained and the students. I want to help the students with the knowledge that I have.

Claiming that rural students rely heavily on teachers to learn English, they believed to have played a significant role in students' achievement in the subject. T3 highlighted that such experiences motivated her to keep going. It was a social-emotional reward for her as she was touched by the students' success, contributing to why she remains in the rural school. Besides, she explained that her teaching experiences had strengthened her pedagogical knowledge, making her more confident in teaching rural students. The remarks made by the teachers indicated that the reason for their longevity is their firm commitment as they felt they were carrying out a critical mission to educate the rural students.

5.2 Emergent theme 2: Passion and enthusiasm for teaching

Several participants in the study expressed satisfaction in teaching rural students to address their needs for relatedness. When asked, "*What keeps you in a rural school?*" they quickly responded with an easy answer, "*I love to teach rural students.*"

T5: I love to be here to teach my students here. They are good people, obedient, and I have no problem to be here for a long time. Hmm, of course, if you're going to talk about performance... they have problems in English, but I don't mind that. That's the reason why I'm here, I can help them to excel. I love to teach rural students, they're nice, they remember you, students in big cities not so. They are already smart, and not really rely on teachers, not the same like here.

T8: The passion of teaching. I love to teach, I love to help students, they follow what I said, and I love to see students shine. Hmm, don't get me wrong, I don't like to show... to show off like that.

From the transcriptions above, it can be seen that T5 and T8 are passionate about teaching in rural schools as they viewed the students as an obedient group of people, and they yield a similar belief that they can help the students in the English subject. In the same vein, T9 expressed that her passion for teaching was the reason that kept her going. T9 proudly noted that she has "*the fire*" and was "*born to be a teacher*".

T9: Okay, what makes me want to stay is because I... I am not sure whether this sounds cheesy but like I said just now, I still think that I am very passionate about teaching English. And I still think that, I am the happiest when I am in the classroom teaching things that I know I am good at. And it always makes me happy when students learn something new and they learn it from me and I don't want to stop feeling that, I don't want to stop being in that situation, you know, when you are able to impart something very precious and you could see the faces of those who you know they just knew it they just learned it.

T9's passion and enthusiasm in teaching gave her emotional satisfaction and confidence to make a difference in students' learning. Moreover, in her opinion, she feels that working in urban schools would be less challenging. This result mirrors the high sentiments of passion and enthusiasm in teaching English to rural students as a reason for their longevity. It is considered another social-emotional reward that turned out to contribute to teacher longevity in rural schools.

5.3 Emergent theme 3: Inspired by family members

Fascinatingly, several participants in the study acknowledged that being inspired by family members is a substantial factor in their decision to remain to teach in rural schools. For instance, T2 stated that she was inspired by her mother, who was also a teacher, and she wished to preserve the teaching legacy in her family.

T2: Of course, my mom is the reason why. I have to make her happy for everything she had sacrificed for my family.

T2 explained that her mother had vast teaching experiences in rural schools, and she would turn to her mother if she needed advice and consultation regarding work. Being a teacher was a sign of appreciation for the love and sacrifices her mother had made for her. Similarly, T6 said she owed her late father for inspiring her to become a teacher. Highlighting that she was “*thrown*” into the teaching profession where challenges and stress can be overwhelming at certain points, she persuaded herself to keep on going because she was raised with a fighting spirit, and it is not her nature to give up.

T6: I have to say, I owe it to my.. to my father. I'm... I have to say, my father is a fighter and I think I got it from him. My late dad, hmm, as a human, as a person, you believe in God. Right? Because of my dad who taught me to be strong, then I told myself to keep on moving forward, and this is what I did, don't quit.

Furthermore, T6 highlighted that she had experienced the beauty of teaching, especially after she could see the differences she has achieved in students' learning. She provided an analogy that teaching is similar to solving a jigsaw puzzle where both require small pieces to be assembled to form a complete picture, which, in the end, would create a feeling of satisfaction and completeness.

5.4 Emergent theme 4: Social and religious obligations

The participants remarked that they felt useful and more needed in rural schools as they felt socially and religiously obliged to help rural students. Responding to whether they chose to teach rural schools intentionally or by coincidence, three participants explicitly affirmed that it was destiny that placed them there. They believed that God has a greater plan for them, and they trust the plan wholeheartedly. For example, T6 highlighted that her faith is her fuel source that kept her serving in the rural school.

T6: Correct me if I'm wrong. So your faith, for me, your job, is like God's... no, it's not obligation. Because if you put obligation, it can end anytime. It's more like faith. Like I said, you know, this wasn't my... wasn't my first choice. I didn't believe myself that I would get it, but because my faith, you know...

T6 believed that she was destined to be a teacher and perceived it as something very positive. Similarly, T7 and T4 also felt the same way and were obliged to reach out to their students, as they defined them as “*people in need*”.

T7: Ok, like this... I always believed Allah put me here, all the way from my hometown. Why? Because He knows I can help, I can do something here. My students here have no exposure to English, I'm the only exposure. Plus, I syukur I have this job, syukur I have students... so I must do my best to help them, if not, I'm not a good personlah..

T4: Well, it's not just about the money.. the pay. Not really about the allowances. I believed that I was sent here to help the students, to make their life better, have better future. It's for me a form of ibadah, help the students, and help myself to serve Allah. That's why I believed in.

T7 talked about social and religious obligations and believed that his destiny was to be sent to SS7 to educate the students. He also stated that he was very grateful to be given a chance to make a living through teaching, and he should show his gratitude by being committed to helping the students. For T4, she believes that teaching is not just an occupation but rather an obligation to help build a better future for the next generation. She viewed teaching as a two-fold commitment in helping students in rural schools, which she described as good deeds she had to do as a servant to God.

6. Discussion

The findings' final depiction was through the essence descriptions of the teachers' lived experiences, as described in the emerging themes. Although the teachers generally acknowledged that they operated in a challenging environment for English language teaching and learning in rural schools, it was not perceived as a sufficient drive for their decision to depart from rural schools. It is an intriguing result as it contradicts results from other studies, in which being in a rural environment is documented as a factor of teachers' departure (Aziz, 2015). Interestingly, although all teachers in the study are urban-originated, they stated that they have readily blended the concepts of unwavering commitment, passion and enthusiasm for teaching, inspired by family members, and social and religious obligations. These blended concepts present a package of their empowerment as a potent mixture to heighten their motivation and function as the fuel source for their longevity in rural schools. The teachers were committed to helping rural students as they believed these students need more help compared to their counterparts in urban schools.

The presence of the blended concepts is found as the reason for their decision to remain serving rural schools. The final representation of the blended concept that emerged from the analysis can be summarised in an overarching theme in that the emotion-teacher-students relationship is the main factor or significant driving force for teachers' longevity in rural schools. Their lived experiences in rural schools had developed a sense of profound care towards their students. They repeatedly talked about the love for the students, dedication, and concern to help the rural students learn English. This relationship's dynamic indicates that social-emotional rewards are placed at the core of their lived experiences as they believed it was their destiny to serve rural schools for a greater good and a deep understanding of what it means to be a person of faith in God. This was the factor that fuels them to walk out their calling of longevity in rural schools.

7. Limitations

Even though the study informs the reasons behind urban-originated English language teachers' longevity and the factor influencing their decision to remain serving in rural schools, it has several limitations. The first is the generalizability of the findings. Even though every endeavour has been made to ensure teachers are recruited from various locations and backgrounds through the purposive sampling of teachers from rural schools to gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study, it is acknowledged that the findings are not generalisable beyond the specific population and demographic from which the teachers were recruited. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate this study with different samples and research sites as it would be beneficial to offer information in understanding similar phenomenon in other rural secondary schools in the country.

Second, the present study focused only on rural schools. There is a need for a comparison study to explore the lived experiences of teachers in urban schools. In that way, this study's results could be compared to identify the differences and similarities concerning teachers' longevity in other areas.

Third, this study has also focused on the phenomenon in rural secondary schools. Thus, it is recommended to expand this study's endeavour by looking at the same issues in rural primary schools that can provide information about the phenomenon under investigation from a different context.

Fourth, the present study also neglected the potential contributing factors in gaining information on the phenomenon under investigation, such as gender and years of experiences due to small samples for this purpose. Future studies can explore more on the different groups of teachers to identify and categorise various longevity reasons according to genders, teaching experiences, and other possible

features so that the similarities and differences can provide more information for improvement actions. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are welcome for this purpose.

Finally, the researchers did not analyse pedagogical practices or student achievement data to measure teaching effectiveness. It is recommended for future studies to examine teacher effectiveness among those who have remained for many years to gain more insights on retaining high-quality teachers in rural schools. Participant observation and student interviews may provide useful data to address this limitation.

8. Conclusion

The present study contributes to understanding urban-originated teacher longevity in rural schools with Social Cognitive Theory as a framework to consider the reasons and the factors influencing their decisions in reflecting on their lived experiences. The results emphasise the blended concepts of unwavering commitment, passion and enthusiasm for teaching, inspired by family members, and social and religious obligations to play essential roles as a fuel source of longevity in rural schools. The participating teachers in this study have exploited their strengths and concerns to help students in rural schools, and these social-emotional rewards have become the factors that shaped their reasons to keep them in rural schools, respectively.

These results advance the understanding of English teacher retention in rural schools by providing insights into the subject, and context-specific descriptions of the teachers' lived experiences and perceptions. It is believed that the findings of this study are significant as they contributed new knowledge to the body of literature on TESL, specifically in rural education, in-service professional development courses, and TESL training programmes. The knowledge generated from this study could offer recommendations for changes in educational practices in which the authorities, school administrators, and teachers could collaborate in improving English education in rural schools and thus positively impacting students' learning, achievement, and school reputation.

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10. References

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