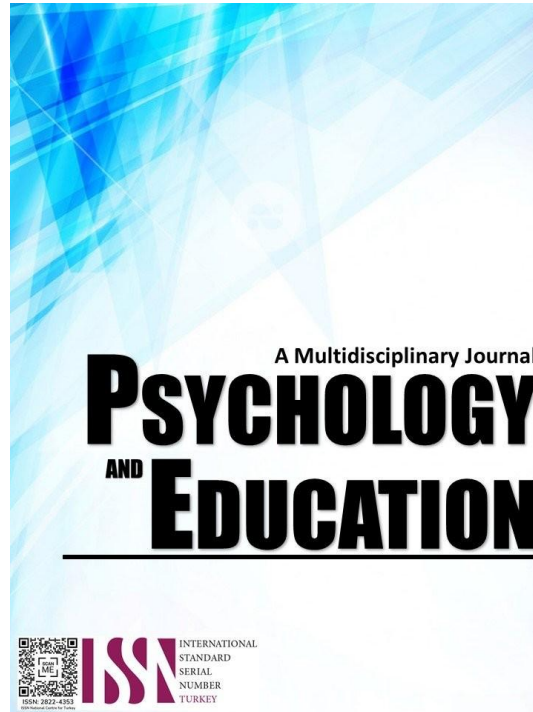


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STUDY OF TEACHER WELL-BEING, IDENTITY,
AND COMMITMENT**



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Teaching as an Existential Challenge: A Phenomenological Study of Teacher Well-Being, Identity, and Commitment

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Abstract

While teaching is a noble calling, the internal struggles of private school educators are often overlooked. This study explores the intersection of existential challenges, meaning-making, and professional commitment at Pacific Southbay College, Inc. Guided by Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory, the research employs a descriptive phenomenological approach to understand how educators navigate heavy emotional and administrative demands. Through in-depth interviews with eight purposively selected teachers, all with at least three years of experience, the study identifies a professional landscape defined by significant role overload. A key finding reveals teachers acting as "emotional shock absorbers," internalizing student traumas at the cost of their own well-being. To manage these pressures, educators utilize "social scaffolding" (family, peers, and faith) and "reflective distancing" to regain balance. Ultimately, teacher persistence stems from reframing hardships as "purposeful sacrifices." This meaning-making process strengthens vocational identity and drives long-term commitment. These findings suggest that private institutions must move beyond administrative checklists to address the holistic, existential needs of their faculty.

Keywords: *existential challenges, Viktor Frankl, phenomenology, private school teachers, vocational identity, professional commitment, teacher well-being*

Introduction

Teaching is highly recognized as a noble profession that shapes the academic and emotional growth of learners (Murugan, 2025). However, beneath this view lie the often-unseen personal struggles educators face as they navigate school expectations and the complex professional realities (Nwoko et al., 2024). Teaching involves significant daily emotional labor to sustain effective classroom interactions and student support (Kariou et al., 2021). These realities are particularly evident in the Philippines, where work-related stress is linked to heavy workloads, administrative paperwork, and large class sizes (Gudelos & Mabitad, 2025). Such conditions directly influence teachers' well-being, their sense of vocation, and overall dedication to the profession (Tarraya, 2023).

Despite extensive documentation of stress and burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022; Tarraya, 2023), most research focuses on psychological and work-related factors. A significant gap remains regarding the deeper, existential aspects of teaching, specifically how teachers interpret professional challenges, sustain a sense of purpose, and negotiate the dilemmas that shape their vocational identity. This gap is most apparent in the Philippine private school setting. While public school contexts are frequently studied, fewer investigations focus on private school teachers' inner lives and their interpretation of professional pressures. Teachers at Pacific Southbay College, Inc., manage academic, service, and interpersonal demands, yet little is known about how these experiences influence their meaning-making processes and evolving sense of identity.

Understanding these personal experiences is vital because they fundamentally affect teacher motivation, resilience, and commitment (Aulén et al., 2021; Beltman et al., 2011). Intrinsic motivation and meaningful engagement are key drivers of well-being and long-term dedication (Patol et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000). By gaining a deeper understanding of these lived experiences, school leaders can move beyond administrative checklists to create support systems that strengthen professional identity and reduce turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Patol et al., 2025).

While existing studies often approach teacher performance through a lens of workload and coping strategies (Gudelos & Mabitad, 2025), less attention is given to the internal process of finding purpose amidst daily challenges (Beijaard et al., 2004; Smagorinsky et al., 2011). Given this gap, this study aims to explore the personal challenges faced by teachers at Pacific Southbay College, Inc. Using a phenomenological approach, this research focuses on teachers' voices and personal narratives to understand the complex realities of their professional lives.

Research Questions

This study investigated the existential challenges encountered by private school teachers at Pacific Southbay College, Inc. This study addressed the following questions:

1. What existential challenges do private school teachers encounter in their professional and personal lives?
2. How do private school teachers experience and navigate these challenges in the context of their profession?
3. How do private school teachers make meaning from the existential challenges they encounter?
4. How do teachers' meaning-making relate to their vocational identity, well-being, and professional commitment?

Literature Review

The core framework for this study is Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory, which identifies meaning-making as a central process in human existence (Frankl, 1985). Frankl asserts that individuals face existential challenges, such as freedom, isolation, responsibility, and meaninglessness, and that deriving meaning from these challenges is essential for psychological well-being (Frankl, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of education, meaning-making enables teachers to interpret challenges not merely as stress but as opportunities for growth and contribution.

Occupational and Existential Challenges

While teaching is a noble vocation (Murugan, 2025), it is fraught with challenges, including heavy workloads and performance pressures (Gudelos & Mabitad, 2025). Research indicates that work-related stress is often linked to administrative tasks and large class sizes, influencing overall dedication to the profession (Tarraya, 2023). Furthermore, teachers engage in substantial emotional labor to sustain classroom interactions, which can lead to exhaustion and burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022; Kariou et al., 2021). In private school settings, these tensions are often intensified by specific service expectations, prompting educators to reflect deeply on their professional roles (Patol et al., 2025).

Meaning-Making, Identity, and Commitment

The "will to meaning" serves as a primary motivational force, especially during periods of professional hardship (Frankl, 1985). Teachers who successfully navigate the intersection of personal values and professional demands report stronger vocational identity and increased resilience (Aulén et al., 2021; Beltman et al., 2011). Conversely, a lack of alignment between an educator's inner life and their external duties can lead to a sense of emptiness and diminished motivation (Beijaard et al., 2004; Smagorinsky et al., 2011). This study addresses the gap in existing literature by exploring how private school teachers specifically navigate these internal landscapes to sustain long-term commitment (Patol et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-phenomenological research design to articulate the essence of private school teachers' lived experiences as they navigated existential challenges and constructed their vocational identity. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals experience and understand specific phenomena within their own consciousness (Smith, 2018). This approach allowed for rich, meaningful insights into how educators interpreted their struggles and how these interpretations shaped their professional commitment. To ensure the integrity of the findings, the researchers practiced bracketing, intentionally setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to allow the participants' authentic narratives to emerge without external influence.

Participants

The participants consisted of eight purposively selected private school teachers from Pacific Southbay College, Inc. in General Santos City. This sample size aligned with the recommendation for qualitative research, which prioritizes the depth of individual insight over broad representation (Creswell, 2013). The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, the point at which no new themes or information emerged from the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of teaching experience at the institution and a willingness to engage in reflective dialogue. Conversely, exclusion criteria applied to teachers on extended leave (e.g., maternity or sabbatical) or those unable to communicate effectively in the study's primary languages (English and Filipino). These parameters ensured that the data collected was both relevant and of high quality.

Instrument

The primary instrument for this study was a Key Informant Interview (KII) guide, which was developed to elicit reflective and detailed responses regarding the teachers' lived experiences. The guide was organized into thematic sections directly corresponding to the research questions: existential challenges, meaning-making processes, and vocational identity formation. Probing questions were included to encourage deeper elaboration.

To ensure validity, the interview guide was reviewed by a panel of three experts, including a school principal and two master teachers with expertise in qualitative research. The validation process utilized specific criteria, including content relevance, clarity of language, and theoretical alignment with Frankl's Existential Theory. Based on the validation results, the experts provided a high approval rating, suggesting minor revisions to the sequence of questions to improve the flow of the dialogue. A mobile audio recorder served as a supplementary tool to ensure an accurate and secure record of the conversations. To ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the data, the researchers employed member checking, where participants were asked to review the interview transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their statements. Furthermore, an audit trail was maintained, documenting every step of the data collection and analysis process to ensure that the findings were clearly derived from the participants' actual narratives.



Procedure

The data collection process commenced after securing formal approval from the administration of Pacific Southbay College, Inc. Following this, the researchers identified and invited eligible participants through purposive sampling. Once informed consent was obtained, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment to foster openness, and participants were encouraged to use their preferred language to better express meaningful nuances. These sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes that captured non-verbal cues and emotional context. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were shared with participants for member checking. This step allowed participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses, which ensured the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data.

Data Analysis

This study followed a descriptive phenomenological approach together with thematic analysis. The process began with the transcribing of all interviews. Significant statements about professional pressures and personal struggles were highlighted and taken out of the transcripts.

The researchers used a multi-stage coding process, starting with open coding to identify key phrases and axial coding to group these ideas into initial themes. These themes described the primary existential challenges teachers faced. The analysis then explored how teachers made meaning of these challenges by looking at their reflections on faith, relationships, and success. Finally, the analysis was used to see how these meanings shaped the teachers' identity and commitment. To ensure the validity of the themes, the researchers used investigator triangulation. The findings and themes were reviewed and discussed among the researchers to ensure they were consistent and truly reflected the data. This teamwork helped make sure the final themes were accurate and not biased by just one person.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers adhered to established ethical and professional standards to protect all participants. This involved negotiating gatekeepers by securing formal permission from the School President before contacting staff. Informed consent was prioritized, with participants briefed on the study's purpose and their rights before signing. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, audio-only recordings were used, and participants were not required to state their names, ensuring their identities remained untraceable in the final report. Finally, the researchers maintained respect for autonomy by clarifying that participants could skip any sensitive questions or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, ensuring the research environment remained safe and respectful.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the phenomenological study exploring the existential challenges experienced by private school teachers at Pacific Southbay College, Inc. Grounded in Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory, the study investigated how teachers confronted professional and personal challenges, how they navigated and made meaning of these experiences, and how this process influenced their vocational identity and professional commitment. The data were derived from in-depth interviews, with participants' statements presented verbatim. Themes were generated through a meticulous coding process to ensure the essence of lived experiences was preserved.

Table 1. *Existential Challenges Encountered by Teachers*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Significant Statements</i>	<i>Informant Codes</i>
Workload and Role Overload	Teachers manage excessive teaching and administrative tasks simultaneously, leading to stress.	Multiple roles, deadlines	"Aside from teaching, there are reports, meetings, and additional school tasks." (P3, 1:48) "Handling both administrative and teaching duties is overwhelming." (P7, 1:23)	P3, P7
Emotional Labor	Teachers are emotionally drained by supporting students' personal and academic needs.	Emotional exhaustion, empathy	"When my students overshare personal problems, especially family issues, it affects my emotions during and after work." (P8, 1:41) "Supporting students emotionally takes a toll on me at times." (P2, 2:45)	P8, P2
Work-Life Tension	Stress from work spills over into personal life, reducing rest and leisure.	Stress at home, lack of rest	"There are times when work-related stress follows me home... it affects my rest and personal time." (P3, 2:17) "I sometimes struggle to manage personal time when my work demands are high." (P4, 2:50)	P3, P4
Adaptation to Change	Teachers struggle to continuously adapt to curriculum changes, new technology, and evolving pedagogical requirements.	Technology adaptation, curriculum updates	"The major challenges I have faced in teaching include adapting to rapid changes in technology..." (P7, 1:08). "Changes in curriculum require me to adapt my teaching methods." (P1, 2:00)	P7, P1



Table 1 shows the existential challenges that teachers faced. These challenges were multifaceted, encompassing workload overload, emotional labor, and work-life tension. One participant described how dual demands caused overwhelming stress:

“Aside from teaching, there are reports, meetings, and additional school tasks” (P3, Line 48).

This dual-role responsibility required constant shifting of focus, leading to role conflict. This finding aligns with Frankl’s (1985) concept of the existential “givens,” where individuals must confront unavoidable tensions. Rather than mere stress, these challenges represent the "existential vacuum" teachers feel when administrative tasks overshadow their primary purpose of teaching.

Similarly, emotional labor was a recurring theme. Participants expressed strain from supporting students emotionally:

“When my students overshare personal problems... it affects my emotions during and after work” (P8, Line 41).

Additionally, work-life tension emerged as a significant hurdle. Patol et al. (2025) argue that work-life conflict significantly contributes to emotional exhaustion. In this study, the "spillover" of work into personal time prevented teachers from achieving the "will to meaning," as their exhaustion blocked their ability to reflect on the value of their work.

Table 2. Teachers’ Navigation of Existential Challenges

Themes	Description	Codes	Significant Statements	Informant Codes
Time Management and Prioritization	Prioritizing tasks to manage professional obligations	Task prioritization, scheduling	"I use prioritization, scheduling, and various productivity tools to manage my tasks." (P1, 1:06) "Planning ahead and staying organized is essential for managing everything." (P6, 2:26)	P1, P6
Reflective Practice	Learning from experience to improve teaching	Reflection, self-assessment	"I view challenges as opportunities to grow. Every challenge teaches me how to grow..." (P2, 2:09) "Reflecting on my practice helps me become a better teacher." (P7, 2:45)	P2, P7
Support Systems	Collaborating with colleagues for advice and emotional support	Peer support, mentorship	"Support from my colleagues and family helps me cope" (P3, 4:15) "Talking to family members after work helps me recharge emotionally." (P2, 4:30)	P3, P2
Boundary Setting	Protecting personal time to maintain well-being	Self-care, rest	"I try to set boundaries and allocate time for rest and family." (P3, 4:39)	P3, P6

The strategies in Table 2 show teachers utilizing various coping mechanisms. One common strategy was time management:

“I use prioritization, scheduling... to manage my tasks” (P1, Line 6).

Teachers also leaned heavily on support systems:

“Support from my colleagues and family helps me cope” (P3, Line 15).

Another strategy was reflective practice. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that self-reflection is crucial for well-being. In an existential context, these navigation strategies are not just tools for efficiency; they are the "freedom of will" described by Frankl. By choosing to organize their time and seek support, teachers exercised their agency to overcome the limitations of their environment.

Table 3. Meaning-Making from Existential Challenges

Themes	Description	Codes	Significant Statements	Informant Codes
Intrinsic Motivation from Student Success	Teachers derive meaning from their students' growth and achievements.	Student success, intrinsic motivation	"Teaching gives me a deeper sense of meaning and satisfaction" (P1, 1:56) "Seeing my students succeed makes all the hard work worthwhile." (P4, 3:59)	P1, P4
Personal Growth and Professional Identity	Teachers experience personal growth through overcoming challenges.	Growth, professional identity	"Every challenge teaches me how to grow... I become more confident, dedicated, and passionate" (P2, 6:31) "I am now more adaptable and reflective in my teaching." (P7, 3:28)	P2, P7
Purpose Beyond the Classroom	Teachers see their roles as more than just academic instruction, giving them a sense of fulfillment.	Vocational fulfillment, mentorship	"Teaching gives me a strong sense of fulfillment because I see it as a calling" (P4, 3:59)	P4

Table 3 explores how teachers made meaning of their struggles. This process was a vital strategy that helped teachers find purpose. Participant 1 expressed:



“Teaching gives me a deeper sense of meaning and satisfaction” (P1, Line 56).

Frankl (1985) asserts that meaning can be found in three ways: through work, love, or suffering. These teachers exemplified this by reframing their suffering (workload) into work (student success). Personal growth was also key; Participant 2 noted,

“Every challenge teaches me how to grow” (P2, Line 31).

This indicates that for these educators, meaning is not found by avoiding challenges, but by growing through them.

Table 4. *Impact of Meaning-Making on Vocational Identity and Professional Commitment*

Themes	Description	Codes	Significant Statements	Informant Codes
Vocational Identity	Sense of professional purpose and self-concept	Professional self, dedication	"I have learned to adjust my teaching approaches based on the needs of my learners" (P1, 2:30) "These experiences have made me more patient, resilient, and reflective. I have learned to adapt my teaching style to better meet students' needs." (P3, 5:30)	P1, P3
Well-Being	Emotional and psychological stability derived from meaning-making	Resilience, motivation	"Seeing improvement in my teaching keeps me motivated... I would advise new teachers to stay patient, remain open to learning, and always remember why you chose to become a teacher." (P3, 06:27)	P3
Professional Commitment	Finding meaning in their work enhances teachers' dedication and long-term commitment to teaching.	Dedication, long-term engagement	"Despite the challenges, these experiences strengthen my long-term commitment because I see teaching as meaningful and impactful." (P3, 8:45) "Seeing students grow and succeed strengthens my long-term commitment" (P7, 5:41)	P3, P7

Table 4 shows the relationship between teachers' meaning-making and their vocational identity, well-being, and professional commitment. The findings revealed that the meaning-making process was directly related to the teachers' ability to maintain their vocational identity, enhance their emotional well-being, and sustain their commitment to the teaching profession.

Teachers who derived meaning from their work reported a stronger vocational identity. Participant 1 stated:

“I have learned to adjust my teaching approaches based on the needs of my learners” (P1, Line 30).

This demonstrated that meaning-making through reflection helped reinforce their sense of professionalism, which aligned with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), who argued that vocational identity is strengthened when teachers find purpose in their work. From an existential perspective, this reflects the "will to meaning", where professional growth is born from the active interpretation of one's role rather than just performing duties.

Furthermore, well-being was enhanced when teachers made meaning of their professional challenges. Participant 2 shared:

“Teaching gives me a sense of fulfillment because I can inspire students” (P2, Line 3).

Finding meaning in teaching helped boost teachers' job satisfaction and emotional well-being, in line with Seligman's (2011) PERMAH model, which highlights the role of meaning in overall well-being. Finally, long-term commitment was strengthened when teachers found meaning in their roles. As Participant 7 noted:

“Seeing students grow and succeed strengthens my long-term commitment” (P7, Line 41).

This reflected the idea that meaning-making enhanced professional commitment by providing teachers with a sense of purpose that sustained their dedication to the profession.

The findings of this study revealed that a dynamic and interconnected progression characterized private school teachers' lived experiences. As illustrated in Figure 1, teachers first encountered multifaceted challenges such as workload overload, emotional labor, and work-life tension. These challenges affected not only their instructional effectiveness but also their personal well-being, creating a constant need for reflection.

In response, teachers actively engaged in coping and navigation strategies, including time management, reflective practice, and the maintenance of personal boundaries. These strategies allowed teachers to manage stress and maintain a sense of control. The effectiveness of these strategies directly facilitated the meaning-making process, whereby teachers derived purpose from student success and experienced personal growth. This process enabled educators to interpret challenges not as obstacles but as opportunities for development, reinforcing their sense of vocation.



Figure 1. *Thematic Progression of Private School Teachers' Lived Experience*

Ultimately, these processes contributed to observable outcomes in the teachers' professional lives. Teachers who successfully navigated challenges and constructed meaning demonstrated stronger vocational identity, sustained resilience, and increased professional commitment. This progression underscored the interconnectedness of the thematic levels, highlighting how each stage was mutually reinforcing. These findings were consistent with Frankl's (1985) Existential Theory, which posits that the search for meaning is central to human resilience. In the context of private school teaching, meaning-making acted as a protective and motivating mechanism, enabling teachers to remain committed despite the complexities of their environment.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, the following conclusions have been drawn:

The first objective indicates that teachers encountered several existential challenges in both their professional and personal lives. The findings indicate that the existential landscape of private school teaching is defined by role overload and emotional labor. Participants consistently highlighted the tension between their primary pedagogical vocation and the extensive administrative demands of the institution. Furthermore, the findings suggest that teachers function as emotional shock absorbers for their students, frequently absorbing secondary trauma arising from students' personal and family crises, which threatens professional equilibrium and emotional well-being.

The second objective reveals that teachers navigate these challenges through a dual process of social scaffolding and reflective distancing. While tactical strategies, such as time management, are used to address workload demands, navigating deeper existential stress relies heavily on communal support systems, particularly family relationships, peer camaraderie, and spiritual faith. The findings also indicate that educators engage in a "reflective pause," which allows them to compartmentalize professional stressors and regain emotional balance temporarily.

The third objective highlights that the study established that meaning-making serves as the central psychological mechanism for resilience. Grounded in Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory, the analysis demonstrated that teachers consciously reframe professional hardships as a form of purposeful sacrifice. By focusing on the transformative impact of teaching on students' lives, participants reinterpret professional suffering associated with workload and emotional demands as a source of vocational fulfillment and personal significance.

Finally, in addressing the fourth objective, the findings demonstrate that meaning-making directly informs the stability of vocational identity and long-term professional commitment. When teachers successfully align professional challenges with a higher sense of purpose, vocational identity becomes re-anchored. This alignment fosters a state of well-being characterized by psychological hardiness, ensuring that commitment is sustained not by the absence of difficulty, but by the presence of a robust, meaning-driven framework.

The findings of this study suggest that teaching in the private school sector is an inherently existential endeavor in which personal

identity is closely intertwined with professional roles. As a result, professional challenges are experienced not merely as technical or organizational difficulties, but as personal crises of meaning. The data further indicate that meaning functions as a primary determinant of teacher retention. The ability to articulate a clear sense of purpose or calling emerges as a critical buffer against the systemic pressures of role overload and emotional exhaustion.

While teachers in this study demonstrated considerable individual resilience, the findings also reveal that existing institutional structures often place a disproportionate burden on teachers' psychological and emotional well-being. Sustained professional commitment, therefore, requires institutional environments that extend beyond administrative efficiency and actively support the inner life, emotional health, and meaning-making processes of teachers.

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations emerged to support teachers' professional development, well-being, and sustained engagement in the profession. These recommendations drew on teachers' reflections on meaning, purpose, and vocational identity, as well as their experiences navigating workload and emotional demands. To strengthen professional identity, school administrations should implement monthly structured "Reflection Circles" where teachers can discuss their personal values and "will to meaning" in a safe peer environment. The findings suggested that embedding such reflection can help teachers clarify their purpose and build resilience against professional challenges. Institutions must also support teacher well-being by formalizing "Workload-Balancing Policies" that set clear limits on administrative tasks to protect instructional time. Specifically, schools are encouraged to provide stress management workshops and "wellness check-ins" to address the heavy emotional labor and work-life tension reported by participants.

Furthermore, schools should conduct annual well-being surveys to align local support initiatives with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). By ensuring that teachers feel supported and fulfilled, institutions can sustain high-quality teaching practices that directly improve student success. Professional commitment should be reinforced through leadership training programs that teach administrators how to provide specific recognition for student-centered achievements rather than just administrative output. Finally, future research should conduct comparative studies of small and large private school settings to explore how factors such as compensation and formal recognition interact with a teacher's internal sense of calling. Such research can provide policymakers with precise data to develop support systems that enhance teacher resilience and overall professional well-being.

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