FACULTY OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: EARLY CAREER TEACHER ATTRITION IN RURAL GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA

A Qualitative Study

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Master's thesis:	30 credits
Programme/course:	L2EUR (IMER) PDA184
Level:	Second cycle
Term/year:	Autumn 2025
Supervisor:	Michael Hansen
Examiner:	Mikael Ring

Abstract

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Aim: Early career teacher attrition is a global issue in different levels. In many countries, early career teacher attrition has affected the economy of the country as well as the education sector since teachers contribute to the academic success of the students and the development of the country by making all types of professionals. Scholarly literature on early career teacher attrition in Sri Lanka is scare even though the factors affecting teacher attrition is mostly common compared to the literature on other countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that influence early career teacher attrition in rural public schools in Sri Lanka and to what extent that these factors have embedded within the professional experiences of early career teachers in rural schools compelling them to leave the profession before reaching to their retirement age.

Theory: Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory was used as the conceptual framework for this study. According to this theory, increased job demands contributed to heightened the stress levels, emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction, job burnout ultimately leading to a higher degree of attrition. Conversely, Job resources act as mitigating factors that alleviate stress levels, reduce job dissatisfaction and decrease emotional exhaustion leading to a lower degree of attrition.

Method: A semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected government school teachers whose first appointment was a rural school in various parts of the country. A total of seven teachers were interviewed and the data was recorded and transcribed.

Results: Data analysis revealed seven major themes: working conditions, personal factors, policy and administration, professional development, compensation and benefits, community and support, and cultural and social factors. The research findings showed that working conditions, compensation and benefits, and personal factors have a significant impact on attrition as they have increased job stress, emotional exhaustion, physiological and psychological well-being of newly appointed teachers in rural school context. Under the theme policy and administration, administrative support had moderate responds while recruitment practices had negatively affected on early career teachers as they were assigned to rural schools against their will which had become a major motive to seek alternatives. Furthermore, professional development reported higher degree of professional isolation, limited career advancement and training opportunities which led to attrition while mentoring program had created a healthy environment to retain in the profession. Cultural shock had a significant impact on these teachers which influenced them to seek alternative careers. Finally, community engagement, peer relationships, and social status of teachers had reduced the attrition rates in rural school across the country.

Foreword

As I commence this phenomenal excursion, I am profoundly grateful for the constant encouragement of the exceptional people I have met. I would like to pay my gratitude to prof. Rohan Fernando and Dr. Vajira De Silva and all my lecturers in the Open University of Sri Lanka. They are the reason I am who I am today.

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Abbreviations

UNESCO	:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
SDG	:	Sustainable development Goal
G.C.E.A/L	:	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
G.C.E.O/L	:	General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
JD-R model	:	Job Demands-Resources model
M.Ed.	:	Master of Education
PGDE	:	Post Graduate Diploma in Education
B.Sc.	:	Bachelor in Science
Dip. Teaching	:	Diploma in Teaching

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of every year students return to their schools with new hopes to continue their academic journey from the place they paused before the vacation. However, many of the teachers do not return to their classrooms to continue their teaching as students expect that they would do. This may be attributed to teachers retiring at the appropriate age or may be due to annual transfer mechanism or teachers may have left the profession at earlier stage in the career. Teachers are the backbone of any country, since they are the ones who provide the groundwork for every other profession. They play an essential role in laying the groundwork for development of the future generation in a wide range of domains by molding knowledge and skills. Previous scholarly articles state that many reasons affect the early career teacher attrition. However, early career teacher attrition has resulted many a number of challenges in many countries as this issue affects the academic life of students as well as the economy of the country which the investments to train and recruit teachers do not achieve its targets and have to invest more funds on recruiting teachers again due to this early career attrition. Rural schools in many countries face teacher attrition than the schools in urban areas. In United states of America veteran teachers play a major role in schools as more than 44% of the early career teachers leave the career within the first five years of their appointment (Clandinin et al., 2015; Seelig & McCabe, 2021). The replacement of these teachers who leave is not only time consuming and costs labor, but also cost a large amount of money for the treasury of the government. As Ingersoll (2002) states that without finding the root cause which promote teachers to leave the profession early there is no meaning of recruiting more and more teachers to fill the vacancies.

> *"……. bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not do any good if we do not patch the holes first."* (Ingersoll, 2002).

In Rural schools, many of the teachers who leave the profession so early are due to remoteness of the assigned school, lack of physical resources that is compulsory for dissimilate the subject matters, social and professional isolation, poor administrative guidance and leadership, lack of career development opportunities, living away from the family, inexperience of teaching, salaries etc. (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

Rural schools face a set of challengers on their own in several categories such as pedagogic, financial, human resource, and these challenges are connected to each other (Crouch & Nguyen, 2021). Rural areas are referred to the areas which exist on the outskirts, distanced from the political, economic, and cultural hubs what is found in cities and towns today (Ankrah-Dove, 1982). As the teacher attrition is at a higher rate in rural schools compared to the schools in urban areas and semi urban areas, the students in such rural schools often experience challenges in continuing their education flawlessly (McCreight, 2000).

In Sri Lanka, newly appointed government teachers are allocated in rural schools in various provinces far away from their homes are not allowed to transfer during their initial five years of service (Herath, 2022). Teachers working in these far-off locations have to locate dependable transportation and safe lodging to get to and from the school. Particularly since many rural schools lack sufficient staff quarters with basic facilities, these appointments also provide other difficulties including being away from

family, properly managing time, transportation expenditures, and additional accommodation fees. Teachers also frequently lack teaching experience, experience social isolation, and inadequate administrative and peer support (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018). Majority of these teachers teach in such rural schools without job satisfaction specially as they are not in their local area, away from the family, and they feel like strangers to the rural context, etc. Thus, factors that influence teacher attrition in these rural schools contexts could be identified i.e. personal and family factors, social factors, economic factors, and professional factors (Ankrah-Dove, 1982).

The Sri Lankan government offers free education to all pupils from kindergarten to the first degree in state universities. However, this fee free education comes with a cost i.e. teacher training, recruitment of teachers and other human and physical resources. This funding comes from the public tax money collected by the government and being a country with limited resources early career teacher attrition makes that funds a waste.

In summary, this study aims to investigate the distinct challenges contributing to teacher attrition in rural government schools in Sri Lanka. This research aims to reconcile conflicting findings and provide evidence based recommendations for enhancing teacher retention in underprivileged schools in rural context in Sri Lanka by examining lived experiences of teachers and understanding the intricate interplay of individual, social, organizational, and environmental factors thereby informing culturally responsive and contextually pertinent interventions to enhance teacher retention and elevate the quality of education for rural children in the country.

Problem Statement

In Sri Lanka, education in rural areas experiences severe challenges. More than 9700 schools out of 10096 government schools in the country are provincial schools which are under privileged (Statistical Branch, Ministry of Education, 2024). These provincial schools are located outskirts of the city limits and are known as hard to staff schools. Due to this situation, newly recruited teachers are assigned to these schools against their will (Herath, 2022). These early career teachers find various challenges while getting used to the rural school context and carrying out their duties in schools. Inside the rural schools, they experience lack of resources such as classrooms quipped with minimum facilities to engage with what they have learned in their academic period and intern periods in urban schools. Factors such as remoteness, social isolation, heavy workloads at school, inadequate facilities, low salaries, administrative and colleague support, community support, cultural shock, limited professional development opportunities, poor mentorship, well-being, and work-life imbalance, act as the drives to these teachers to leave their career early. Due to this issue, the government loses their cost on teacher training and recruitment as well as the trained human resource as they exit the profession early. The early career teacher attrition has made severe impact on student lives in the rural context as they do not get resources for a continuous learning especially for the examination classes i.e. Grade 5 scholarship, G.C.E.O/L, and G.C.E A/L classes.

The high rates of teacher attrition in rural schools in the country significantly challenges the ability of the students to adapt varying teaching styles. Consequently, the early career teacher attrition in these rural areas has exacerbated the student dropout rates and adversely affected the academic achievements of the rural student population. In future, this trend would likely to impact the job market of the country and pose socio economic challenges for individuals who have dropped out due to externa factors that are beyond their control.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the factors contributing the to early career teacher attrition in rural government schools in Sri Lanka, examinig how these factors are embeded within their professional experiences influencing their decisions to leave the profession before their retirement age.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary factors that influence early career teacher attrition in rural government schools in Sri Lanka?

2. How these factors are embedded within their professional experiences influencing their decisions to exit the profession before reaching their retirement age?

Significance of the study

The aim of this study is to provide insights into the factors that influence teachers who have worked or are currently working in rural government schools in Sri Lanka as they faced or face psychological, socioeconomic problems when they are recruited into rural school context. Moreover, by conducting this study, it is hoped to bring conscious awareness the prevalent dynamics and interaction patterns in these rural school contexts in Sri Lanka, especially those seen undesirable by the teachers, so fostering reflection, discussion, and action. The development of a healthy and motivated teaching force, sustained by evidence-based organizational policies and practices, would promote the establishment of a healthy environment for those who teach in such “hard-to-staff” schools located in geographically rural locations in Sri Lanka.

Background

This section provides an overview of the Sri Lankan education system, which is insightful to understand the context of this study. This starts with a brief history of how Sri Lankan school education evolved from the colonial period to the present day including the categorization of the schools under different criteria and recruitment of teachers to the public schools in the country and how the administration of these schools are carried out based on the type of school.

Overview of Sri Lankan Education

Throughout the colonial era, spanning over 400 years from 1505 to 1948, Portuguese, Dutch, and British authorities shaped the education system in the country (Fernando, 2012). Initially, foreign rulers implemented their educational system mostly in the coastal regions under their control. The missionary school system was initially established by the Portuguese during their governance (Asad, 1993; Fernando, 2012). During the colonial period, British administrators in Sri Lanka promoted schools established by missionary enterprises (Asad, 1993). During that time period, the rulers did not support the education system that was already in place. Instead, they advocated for a religion-based education system throughout the country, in which English was the exclusive medium of instruction.

Since achieving independence from colonial governance in 1948, the Sri Lankan education system has experienced substantial transformation throughout the last seventy-six years. These advancements demonstrate a dedication to improving educational practices and regulations to conform to global standards and modern educational paradigms. From elementary school through first-degree university, education has been essentially free since the Free Education Act of 1945 (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018; Arunatilake, 2006; Fernando, 2012). This fee-free education provides textbooks, school uniforms, transport to the school and back free to all the school children in the country (A. W. Little & Green, 2009, p. 5). At its several levels, the government funds administrative and development related expenses as well as investment costs and recurrent costs (Arunatilake, 2006). At present, there are more than ten thousand government schools (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018; Herath, 2022) and more than hundred international schools owned by the private investors (Herath, 2022) and almost eight hundred Pirivena – where the school run by the Buddhist monks within their temple premises (Herath, 2022) cater the younger generation of the country to excel in their pedagogical journey (Statistical Branch, Ministry of Education, 2024).

Government School System in Sri Lanka

After initiation of the Free Education Act in 1945, some of the schools were converted in to “central colleges” and more facilities were allocated to develop the infrastructure of the school as well as to develop the education (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018; Fernando, 2012, p. 5). In addition to these schools, prevailing schools in the cities and rural areas were also open to the free education. Graduates from government universities are assigned teaching positions in government schools nationwide after applying for available vacancies, regardless of their place of origin. This complies with the legal mandate obligating them to serve in any assigned place within the country, as they are classified as government employees. Consequently, government schools have evolved over the years in terms of both human resources and physical resources, which has resulted in their division into four main categories i.e. 1AB School, 1C School, Type 1 school, and Type 2 School (Table 1) depending on the facilities and degrees of education they offer (Herath, 2008, 2022; A. Little, 2010; Statistical Branch, Ministry of Education, 2024). 1AB schools are known as “National Schools” governed directly by the central government whereas Type 1 and Type 2 schools which are located in villages are governed by the provincial councils in the respective province (Herath, 2008; A. Little, 2010). The national schools which are established in 1985, under the ministry of education of the central government have more facilities in both human and physical resources (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018). Provincial schools usually are 1C, Type 1, and Type 2 have lack of resources as they are managed by the respective provincial ministries (Abayasekara & Arunatilake, 2018).

Type of School	Description
1AB	Schools having Advanced Level Science (Bio Science and/ or Physical Science) stream classes
1C	Schools having Advanced Level classes other than Science (Arts and/or Commerce and/or Technology streams) stream
TYPE 1	Schools having classes only up to grade 11 (Grade 1-11 or grade 6-11)
TYPE 2	Schools having classes from grade 1-5 or grade 1-8

Table 1 Types of Government Schools in Sri Lanka

According to the Free Education Act, government schools have grades from 1 to grade 13, in which G.C.E O/L examination is held at grade 11 and students who pass this examination are eligible to enter G.C.E A/L classes at grades 12 and 13 which G.C.E A/L - which is the university entrance examination is held (*Annual_School_Census_SummaryReport_2022.Pdf*, n.d.; Herath, 2022; A. Little, 2010; MoE, 2024). Furthermore, government schools are classified as "National Schools" and "Provincial Schools" for administrative convenience (Herath, 2008; MoE, 2020, 2024). The school Census Report (2024), indicates that there are 396 national schools administered by the central government and 9,700 provincial schools managed by respective provincial ministries across nine provinces in the country making the total of 10, 096 government school all around the country. These public schools are further classified according to the medium of instruction as “Sinhala Medium”, “Tamil Medium”, “ Bilingual”, and “Trilingual” schools (A. Little, 2010; MoE, 2024). Students in these public schools receive a tuition-free education, along with free uniforms and course books (Herath, 2022).

Teacher Recruitment in Sri Lanka

Teachers to the government schools are recruited by the ministry of education. This recruitment takes place through couple of ways. Trained teachers who complete a diploma in teaching from teacher training institutions under the ministry of education are absorbed directly to the teaching force. Another way of recruiting teachers to the government school through a competitive examination to the graduates held by the department of examinations to fulfil the vacant positions in national and schools managed by the provincial education ministries. Based on these recruitment mechanisms, there are different kinds of teachers are in service in the public schools such as Graduate teachers, trained teachers, trainee teachers, untrained teachers , and other teachers (Herath, 2022; MoE, 2020). Moreover, these newly appointed educators encounter numerous hurdles, including the necessary resources for effective topic delivery, an optimal classroom atmosphere, and peer support, particularly in schools with a limited number of teachers as there are more than 1500 Type 1 and Type 2 schools with 1-50 students (MoE, 2024, p. 13) and more than 3000 schools which all of them are provincial schools are with teaching staff less than 10 (MoE, 2024, p. 14). The salary of the teachers is a less amount compared to the other professionals with similar basic qualifications. So there will not be much to spent from the salary as they have additional costs for transportation, food, and lodging along with other basic expenditures.

In essence, the Sri Lankan education system, despite its evolution since colonial times, continues to suffer from a basic inequity: the pronounced gap in resource allocation between urban and distant rural schools. This disparity, driven by past biases and sustained by existing teacher recruiting methods, has established a system in which rural schools are constantly disadvantaged, depriving pupils in these regions of equivalent chances as their urban peers. Consequently, teachers employed in those schools

often depart from their careers before to their intended retirement, as they experience stress and emotional exhaustion, resulting in physical and psychological health complications.

2 Theoretical Framework

Job demands and resources (JD-R) model which was initially developed by the two researchers Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti in late 1990s (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Corso-de-Zúñiga et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2016; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Yin et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2023) is used as the theoretical framework for this study since it is widely recognized model in organizational psychology that gives valuable insights of well-being of the employee and their performance in various fields without considering the demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Job demands and resources framework comprises two distinct components i.e. job demands and job resources.

Job demands pertain to the aspects of work that necessitate prolonged physical, psychological, social, or organizational effort, whereas job resources encompass the physical, psychological, social, or organizational factors that mitigate job demands, facilitate task accomplishment, and promote employee growth and development.(Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Huang et al., 2016). Specifically, teachers face a wide variety of complicated challenges during the course of their job to accomplish the tasks in school environment (Ingersoll, 2001; Lu et al., 2024). By using the job demands and resources paradigm, researches and educators can evaluate the particular challenges (job demands) and supportive factors (job resources) which actually present in the school context and this is also helpful to understand how far these factors influence ability of the teachers to cope with stress due to job demands and remain resilient in their profession. Essentially, this framework helps to make a detailed analysis of what stresses that teachers face and what supports are available in the school settings in order to enhance the effectiveness and well-being of the teachers (Lu et al., 2024). This model is particularly applicable to the teaching profession, where the interplay between demands and resources significantly impacts decisions of teachers to remain in or leave their positions (Yin et al., 2018). Burnout consists of three main symptoms namely, emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy (Baka, 2015; Madigan & Kim, 2021). According to many scholarly articles define early career attrition of the teachers as discontinuation of the profession within five years of appointment (Weldon, 2018).

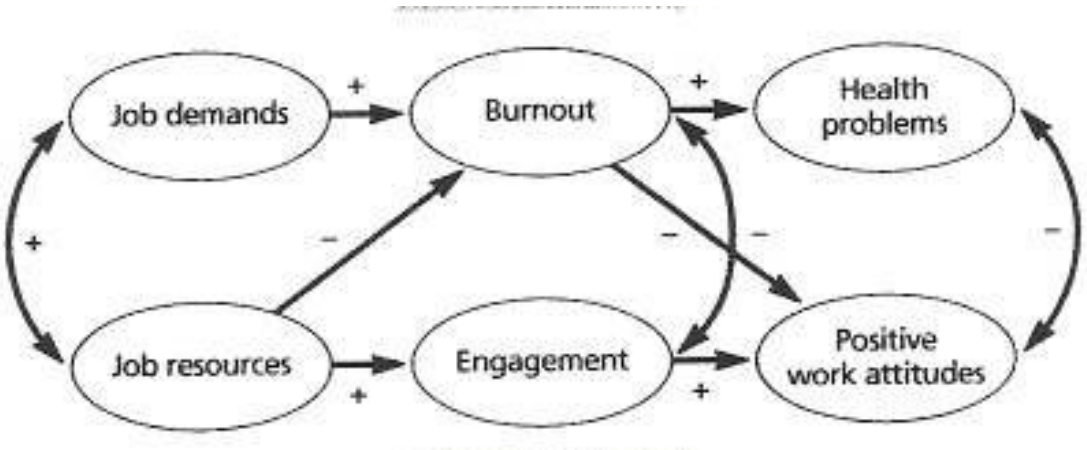

Figure 1 Job Demands and Resources Model. Source: (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 5)

As JD-R model is a flexible framework, a certain change was done according to the present study of factors influence burnout and attrition of the teachers. Health problems of the diagram 1 which illustrates the JD-R model introduced by Schaufeli and Bakker was referred to develop the JD-R model that fits to the current study. As the diagram 2 shows job demands and job resources are positively connected. As the job demands such as increasing workload, when classroom management becomes harder due to the behavior of students and inexperience of the teacher, the burnout would increase in teachers which would finally lead attrition. The job resources such as mentoring of the senior experienced teachers, support from the colleagues, professional development workshops and trainings, and administrative support, burnout of the teachers would be reduced as they are inversely related. Whereas engagement is positively related to job resources and would lead to improved performances, higher job satisfaction. Job resources play a crucial role in fostering engagement. When employees have access to sufficient resources, they are more likely to be energized and dedicated to their work to reach the job satisfaction. But engagement is negatively related to burnout and burnout is negatively related to engagement. As they are inversely related to each other it is clear when the engagement is at higher level, burnout would be at a lower level and vice-versa.

According to the JD-R model, positive work attitudes are significantly influenced by job resources. When employees have access to adequate resources, such as support from colleagues, opportunities for growth, and administrative support, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards their work. This would reduce attrition of the teachers. However, if the above-mentioned job resource factors do not meet the teachers in order to make a healthy environment to continue profession, the attrition rate would be high due to lack of positive work attitudes. This revised JD-R model would be able to find the relationship among the factors influence the attrition of graduate teachers in government schools in the country.

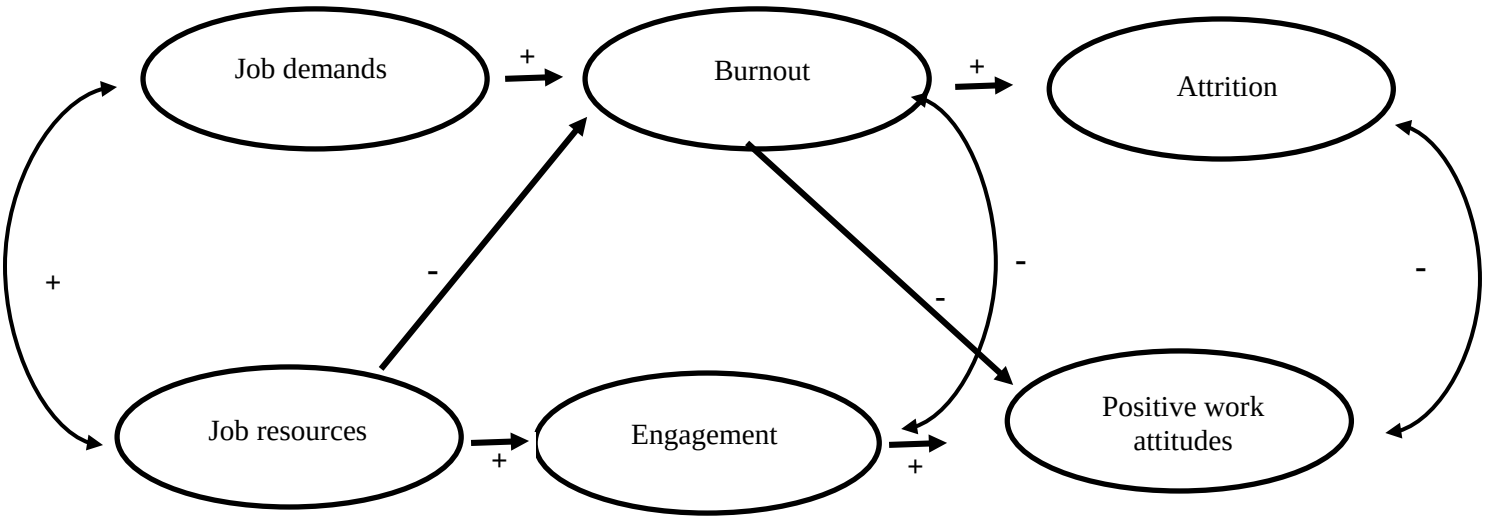

Figure 2 - Research Model

In the research model, attrition is replaced in the place of health problems as this study is focused on factors influencing early career teacher attrition. If health problems to be considered in the study, it

would become more time consuming and a become lengthier which would not fit to the time frame of the study.

In summary, the job demands and resources (JD-R) model is used as the conceptual framework in the study to find the factors that influence early career teachers to exit their profession as it describes job demands which heighten the stress level, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and negatively impact on physiological and psychological well-being of the employees. While the job resources reduce the stress level, emotional exhaustion, increasing the job satisfaction, physiological and psychological well-being of the employees encouraging them to retain in the profession. The revised JD-R model by replacing the health problems by attrition is used in this research study.

3 Literature overview

The literature review examines current studies on the variables affecting early career teacher turnover in isolated rural schools in Sri Lanka and other nations. It focuses especially on the several factors that have led instructors in these environments to quit early from their careers. This overview seeks to find common issues and trends that might also be pertinent to the Sri Lankan situation by means of comparative research from many settings. This study not only emphasizes the particular situation instructors in rural areas find but also aims to guide possible retention and support policies.

The issue of early career teacher attrition has created a significant attention in educational research sector, particularly in rural schools. Many numbers of studies have identified a range of factors that influence the teachers in such schools to leave their profession earlier including personal well-being, work-place environment, support from colleagues, professional development, and demographic and contextual factors. Researchers in United States of America, Australia, have documented their findings and the experiences of teachers who have faced job burnout and early career attrition providing valuable insights which can be applied to Sri Lankan context. Having a better understanding on these factors is efficient in making polices to retain the teachers in these hard to staff rural schools in Sri Lanka as it is highly important to create a healthy environment for the students in such schools to have a better continuous learning with experienced teachers.

Personal well-being

With excessive workload in teaching, many of the teachers could not find time to spend with their family members and they easily lose the work life balance. Work-life imbalance significantly impacts teachers who are recruited in rural schools far away from their residences as they are departed from their parents or with spouse and children (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2017; Lei et al., 2021). Teachers who are assigned in rural schools either have to relocate with their whole family or the teacher him/herself has to find a temporary accommodation to stay closer to the workplace. Many such teachers are often required to find a place to board closer to schools and prolonged periods of separation from their children and loved ones could lead them feeling isolation, stress, and emotional distress which adversely affect their quality of life. This disconnection could result in feelings of isolation, stress, and emotional distress, which adversely affect the overall quality of the life of teachers. Gallant and Riley (2017) state that some teachers were compelled to instruct disciplines for which they lacked training and qualifications, falling beyond their area of expertise. This may result from a deficiency of instructional personnel to provide pertinent subject matter to students in hard-to-staff schools situated in rural areas. In rural schools, principals assign available teachers to instruct subjects outside their expertise, resulting in emotional exhaustion for teachers and confusion and frustration for pupils.

As Ji Liu (2021), stresses out that emotional exhaustion considered as a core aspect of job burnout which makes the teachers in such schools to decide to leave the profession within the first few years of the appointment. Teachers experience emotional exhaustion which is caused by job stress, job burnout, excessive work load which is not related to teaching, student behavior (Den Brok et al., 2017; Farmer,

2020; Ramos & Hughes, 2020; Tran & Moskovsky, 2024). Moreover, long hours of work also lead to emotional exhaustion and job burnout in teachers. Gallant and Riley (2017) further discuss that teachers in Australia have to work long hours which is a unique situation which lead teachers to leave the profession as they lose the work-life balance due to inflexible working conditions and teachers lose their job satisfaction as well.

Work-place environment

Workplace environment also plays a major role in making teacher to leave the career earlier than their retirement age. School climate and culture, physical and human resources available in the school, administrative support, community and parental support are main elements of the workplace environment. Classroom climate is an external environmental factor that can influence teachers' instruction and behavior in the classroom (Mai, 2025). It refers to the overall atmosphere within a classroom, shaped by the interactions between teachers and students (Mai, 2025). In essence, classroom climate encompasses the collective perceptions, experiences, and emotions of both teachers and learners about the classroom environment. A poor school climate and culture negatively affect teachers in fulfilling their career goals (Everitt, 2020; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Glazer, 2018; Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2017; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Ramos & Hughes, 2020; Trent, 2017). Melissa and Yvonne (2017) describe that having limited classroom resources related to teaching and learning process, teachers had to bear the costs of those essential resources as they purchased them in-order to cater the subject as they have planned. Thus, the teachers had to work under lack of infrastructure and lack of resources to create a healthy school climate and better school culture. Furthermore, autocratic leadership which creates unsupportive administration to teachers is highlighted by Peruvian international schools in Lima (Everitt, 2020). This situation clearly contributes to an unhealthy school climate, prompting teachers to either leave their schools or exit the profession entirely. Moreover, add-hoc regulations makes a vital support for corruption in schools instead of creating a better work place climate for teachers as well as pupils (Everitt, 2020). Ramos (2020) elaborates that poor administrative qualities badly affect the school climate and culture making the school a place where teachers cannot further work in positive mindset. Gallant and Riley (2014) explains that transformational leadership creates a healthy workplace climate which creates a negative impacts on attrition of teachers.

Gallant and Riley (2017) emphasize that teacher pupil relationship also creates a sound school climate and a better culture making the teachers to retain in the profession and this relationship mediates the job burnout due to poor administration of the school. In the narrative study conducted by Gang Zhu et al. (2020), it is observed that unsupportive school administration contributes to administrative burnout in schools in China, thereby creating a detrimental school climate for teachers who are deeply passionate about their profession. In addition to those, Gallant and Riley (2014) reveal that excessive administrative workload assigned by school management, coupled with inflexible working conditions, has resulted in an unsupportive school environment. This situation compels teachers to seek alternative career options, as it contributes to significant psychological challenges. Regarding community and parental support, many parents advocate for initiatives aimed at enhancing school climate and culture. They believe that over 75 percent of teachers are capable of effectively managing their classrooms, thereby fostering a more conducive teaching and learning environment (Ramos & Hughes, 2020).

Support from colleagues

Farmer (2020), Lei et al. (2021), Newberry and Allsop (2017), Tran and Moskovsky(2024) illustrate the lack of colleague support in schools which lead the teachers to isolate and to lead self-efficacy. One of the research finding of Newberry and Allsop (2017) is the lack of colleague support which teachers become more isolated in the work place environment. Farmer (2020) highlights that collegial support is essential for teachers to develop them professionally as they could share their knowledge and experiences among them. The early teachers would be able to gather such knowledge from teachers who are in the profession for longer period. Lei et al. (2021) states that some teachers experience isolation within their profession, leading to feelings of depersonalization and a loss of teacher agency. This isolation can diminish their sense of connection to their work and reduce their ability to influence their teaching environment, ultimately impacting their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Professional development

In the context of career advancement, Gallant and Riley (2014), Kelchtermans (2017), Liu (2021) and Zhu et al. (2020) indicate that teachers face significantly limited promotional opportunities throughout their professional journey. This scarcity of advancement options can lead to stagnation, affecting motivation of teachers and professional growth, and may ultimately contribute to higher attrition rates within the profession. Zhu et al. (2020) discuss how the lack of professional development contributes to the limited promotional opportunities available to teachers. This deficiency not only hinders skill enhancement and career growth of teachers but also perpetuates a cycle of stagnation, reducing overall job satisfaction and increasing the likelihood of attrition from the profession. Furthermore, Tran and Moskovsky (2024), Gallant and Riley (2014), Kelchtermans (2017), and Liu (2021), highlight the limited pathways for career development in the teaching profession. They reinforce the notion that the absence of clear and accessible advancement routes can discourage teachers from pursuing long-term careers, ultimately affecting retention and the overall quality of education. Tran and Moskovsky (2024) state in their study that many teachers have the intention and leave the profession in pursuing positions outside teaching for better socio economic status. Farmer(2020), Glazer (2018), and Zhu et al. (2020), highlight that the lack of meaningful professional development opportunities can exacerbate teacher attrition rates. When teachers feel unsupported in their growth and skill enhancement, they tend to leave the profession in search of better opportunities.

Excessive workload

Excessive workload also negatively affects productivity of teachers, leading to decreased job satisfaction (Heffernan et al., 2022). Among teachers planning to leave the profession, 62% cited workload pressures and their effects on health, well-being, and other areas of their personal lives. Teachers often characterized their workload as "excessive," "unrealistic," and "unsustainable" (Heffernan et al., 2022). Glazer (2018), Newberry and Allsop (2017), Tran and Moskovsky (2024) have highlighted the excessive workload and excessive teaching hours in their studies which make teachers lead to job burnout and attrition. Moreover, Gallant and riley (2014) has mentioned that teachers in Australia has to carry out the workloads which are not related to teaching but to administrative and filling unnecessary documents. Gallant and Riley (2014), and Liu (2021) also have focused on low salaries and the less benefits that the teachers receive in urban Chinese schools. Student behavior also plays a pivotal role in teacher attrition as it mainly affects the classroom management and student–teacher relationship. Positive

relationship between students and teachers help teachers to retain in profession (Farmer, 2020). Additionally, Farmer (2020) emphasizes that in certain schools across the United States, student violence has contributed to an unhealthy school climate and culture. In some cases, teachers have experienced assaults by students. Also more than 40 percent of the teachers showed negative performances after experienced such situations (Farmer, 2020). In addition to Farmer (2020), Everitt (2020), and Swanson and Huff (2019) illustrate the connection between student behavior and the teacher attrition as it has a positive correlation. Policy and governance also play a major role in teacher attrition as it directly applied to the well-being, job satisfaction, job burnout, emotional exhaustion of teachers. Everitt (2020) has elaborated the issues in policy making and governance as the policies made by the governing bodies of the international schools such as hiring native speakers to teach foreign languages and charging higher school fees from the students and making ad-hoc changes in the school management rules cause teachers to survive in good psychological conditions to carry out daily routines in the schools.

Although the existing literature has thoroughly investigated the teacher attrition across diverse contexts, there is a significant deficiency of research explicitly addressing the early career teachers in rural schools in the Sri Lanka. Most of the studies have focused on urban school contexts or failed to distinguish between periods of a career of a teacher especially who taught in rural schools or currently engaged in rural schools which leads a significant deficiency in comprehending the unique challenges experience by this cohort of professionals. This study seeks to fill this vacuum by examining the lived experiences of early career teachers in rural Sri Lanka, thereby offering useful insights to inform targeted retention efforts and enhance educational outcomes in these regions. Furthermore, the findings of this study would be an essential resource for policymakers, providing evidence-based recommendations to amend recruitment policies for newly appointed teachers in rural schools, thereby enhancing teacher retention and educational outcomes in these regions in future. In this study, factors such as working conditions, personal factors, policy and administration, professional development, community and support, salary and benefits, and cultural and social factors which influence teachers in such rural schools in Sri Lanka to leave their career earlier than the expected retirement age were concerned.

In summary, factors such as job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, work-life imbalance negatively affect the personal well-being of the teachers and poor school climate and culture, lack of human and physical resources available in the schools to facilitate teaching and learning process, poor administrative support, and community and parental support create an unhealthy working environment in schools for teachers to continue their profession without leaving before their retirement age. Teachers also lack of strong colleague support, professional development opportunities, and strong colleague support to make them professionally not fit enough to develop in the career and retain. Demographic factors such as excessive workload, student behavior, salary and benefits, age, gender, and policy and governance also influence teacher to decide whether to stay or leave the profession early.

4 Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodology of the study, including participant selection, interview execution, data transcription, and thematic analysis employed to discern factors affecting teachers' decisions to exit the profession within rural government schools as well as how the ethical considerations were maintained through the process.

This study focuses on finding the factors influence early career teacher attrition in rural government schools in Sri Lanka. To achieve this goal, a qualitative interview methodology was executed. It is necessary understand what are the factors that the teachers in rural schools in the country experience in their period of teaching in such school contexts by conducting qualitative research rather than carrying out a quantitative study. As Jachens et al. (2018) stresses out, quantitative surveys mainly focus on numerical data and statistical analysis. These surveys are highly suitable for measuring and testing the relationships between the variables which are predefined. However, in a quantitative survey, subtle differences, complexities, unexpected factors, and grey areas o are hard to understand. Thus, to study about the factors which influence teachers who teach in rural contexts, a qualitative method would be highly suitable (Jachens et al., 2018). Furthermore, by doing interviews is not to collect answers to the questions or not to test the research hypotheses and not to evaluate statically but to explore the “lived experiences” of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seidman, 2006). This study used open-ended interviews to collect the lived experiences (Seidman, 2006, p. 9) of the teachers who teach or have taught in rural schools in the country.

Selection of participants

All the participants who shared their experiences were teachers who were recruited to rural government schools right after their appointment. Teaching in such rural school form minimum five years was a mandatory for them and it was mentioned on their letter of appointment. To find the respective participants, a message was shared on WhatsApp groups where all the teachers are grouped by the teachers’ unions. From the respondents, purposive sampling was employed to select teachers who have their own experiences in such rural school contexts. Seven teachers were selected from responses. Four of these seven teachers were currently work in rural schools and remaining teachers were currently work in schools nearer to their residencies after completing the mandatory five years of rural school teaching. According to Creswell &Creswell (2018), the selection of the research participants, documents, locations, or any other supporting material should be selected to follow the concept of the research study.

All volunteered research participants were contacted through WhatsApp, email, and shared the informed consent document initially and altogether 7 teachers were interviewed within 2 weeks. The principals of the relavant schools of the participants were informed about this research study and participants through telephone calls as the email, internet facilities were limited in these schools. Five teachers of

this sample are graduate teachers while the other two teachers are trained teachers who passed out from National Teacher Training Colleges. The follwing table 2 shows the academic qualifications and demography of the sample of teahers.

Name	Gender	Age	Appointment year	Academic qualifications	Subject/s teach	Section/s teach
Teacher 1	Male	44	2018	PGDE	English language	Lower secondary
Teacher 2	Male	36	2014	M.Ed.	Mathematics	Secondary & G.C.E. O/L
Teacher 3	Male	36	2018	Dip. Teaching	English language	Primary and lower secondary
Teacher 4	Female	45	2009	BSc.	Science	Lower secondary & G.C.E. O/L
Teacher 5	Male	47	2008	BSc.	Mathematics & Physics	GC.E. O/L & G.C.E. A/L
Teacher 6	Female	42	2011	Dip. Teaching	Primary subjects	Primary homeroom teacher
Teacher 7	Female	36	2013	BSc.	Science & Science for technology	GC.E. O/L & G.C.E. A/L

Table 2: background of the participants

Data Collection

Initially, an interview guide was outlined according to the main constructs and to explore the 'lived' experiences of teachers tell their story on how they were recruited to rural schools and how they experienced this recruitment which is farther away from their homes, how long they were obliged to work as stated on their appointment letter in such rural schools, how about their experiences on staff mates, principals, and administrative officials in the zonal and provincial education offices in the relevant areas that their school belongs, physical resources available in the school that the required for teaching and learning environment, availability of the basic facilities in the school, support from the community, opportunities for career development and higher educational programs, job satisfaction, job burnout, work-life balance, and support of the administrative officials during transfers to a school closer to the residence. Finally, a debriefing (Kvale, 2007, p. 69) was conducted before the interview was called off in every session with the research participant. Two pilot interviews were conducted with one male teacher and a female teacher who are currently assigned in to two different rural schools in two different provinces of the country. These pilot interviews indicated that the open-ended interview question guide was appropriate; however, both interviewees focused on their experiences on rural school contexts. Consequently, after recalling of the informed consent document followed by briefing of the objectives of the study, it was emphasized to focus on their experiences on rural school context to each participant. All the interviews were conducted through Zoom application and each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. At the beginning of all the interviews, the purpose of the interview was briefed to each participant and to record the audio and video of the interviews, recording option available in Zoom application was used. Participants were asked to provide an introduction about themselves, how long have they been into the teaching profession, academic background, how far from home to school, etc.

as an ice breaker question. Then, they were asked to share their experience on how they got into teaching, what type of school they were assigned, food and lodging, and the school environment. Follow-up questions were asked to encourage them to share more detailed experiences. The use of open-ended questions effectively encouraged the interviewees to share their personal experiences. Additionally, follow-up questions (Keeling et al., 2016) helped them to delve deeper into their lived experiences. This mechanism made participants to express clearly their experiences enhancing qualitative data collection required for the study. After that, they were asked to elaborate their experiences on support that they received from their colleagues, school principals., administrative staff of the zonal and provincial education offices, and the community. After collecting such information, more questions were asked to dig deep into their lived experiences based on the answers they gave which help required for the study. Finally, the participants were asked to share any special experiences that they have during the period of the rural school contexts and recorded all data. These interviews could be categorized as narrative interviews (Kvale, 2007, p. 85) as the subjects share their experiences as telling stories when they elaborate their experiences. This kind of open-ended interviews and in-depth conversations produce a large amount of data that has to be transcribed, analyzed according to the themes, interpretation of these data also consumes time and require resources (Kvale, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Contacting the right participants that have never met, and doing open-ended interviews which lead to in-depth conversations to explore their lived experiences also consumes a good amount of time (Seidman, 2006).

Data Transcription

Kvale (2007) elaborates that interviews are live social interactions where the subjects can quickly access the pace, tone, and the body language of the discussion, whereas, these abstracts cannot be experienced to the reader who reads the transcripts of the interviews. When the voice recordings immediately loses the body language including gesture and posture of the subjects, followed by transcription of those voice records loses the tone, pace, intonation, even breathing, of the participants (Kvale, 2007, p. 105). All the data collected through seven Zoom interviews were transcribed by using the computer software Nvivo 14 and were saved in the computer for the analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data which were transcript from the voice recordings of the interviews. Analysis of data is a crucial phase of a qualitative research study where a careful review and identification of patterns, themes and insightful revelations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collected was analyzed by using thematic analysis by using coding. Transcripted data were read and reread several times to figure out the patterns and then coded by using computer software Nivivo 14. Kvale (2007, p. 116) described coding as a computer aided process of attaching keywords to significant segments of text found in data. These segments could be sentences, phrases, or even single words that capture the essence of the relevant information.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) articulated a framework for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research studies, emphasizing the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, Adler (2022) stresses out that transparency also plays a major role in trustworthiness in qualitative research study as the researcher is the principal research instrument. To satisfy the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies were executed throughout the data analysis process. All the seven interviews in this study were recorded and all of them were transcribed in order to analyze using Nvivo 14 software which enhance the credibility and the validity of the study. additionally, this reduces the risk of bias in the study by avoiding the interpretation of the researcher of the findings of the study. Purposive sampling was employed to select the research participants who all have their lived experienced in rural school contexts in different parts of the country which enhances the transferability of the study. Moreover, member checking was carried out with participants after collecting data and allowed them to review and to give the feedbacks on the interpretations enhancing the confirmability of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Since Nuremburg Code, (Rice, 2008) was established, research ethics have developed dramatically. This fundamental paper has helped to create thorough rules and guidelines for which researchers are obliged to comply. These ethical guidelines are meant to guarantee the protection of research subjects, thereby keeping their identities from public publication and so supporting the integrity of the study process. Following the ethical codes stated by the British Educational Research Association (2018), from informed consent to confidentiality of the participants even after the publication of the thesis was followed.

Initially, the informed consent was taken from the interviewees by sending a written document to each participant briefing the purpose of the study and how the data is collected and how identity, rights, and well-being of the participants are protected. This informed consent letter describes that any participant can withdraw from the research at any time without any cost and the participants has the right not to answer any question during the interview as he or she wishes. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudo names were used and the geographical locations of the schools that the participants work was not mentioned (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Teachers were named as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3 etc. To contact the teachers who are recruited in rural schools all around the country, WhatsApp groups were used. The consent from the admins of those teachers' groups were obtained before contacting teachers to send the informed consent form and form was sent to the teachers who were willing to participate through email. The signed consent form returned by the participants, states that the participants willingly took part to the study without any external influence from the researcher. The informed consent form has briefly explained the objectives of the study and the duration of the interview etc. Privacy of the interviewees was protected and data which is recoded voices of the teachers during the interviews were kept safe as well as the transcripts and all data will be deleted once the study was graded according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and aligned to the regulations of the Swedish Research Council (*2024*). After many of the research studies, contact details of the participants, data collected on the field, data collected through interviews, transcript data are deleted

from the computers and storage devices to protect the identity and integrity of the research participants (Fujii, 2012).

This research was executed ethically and responsibly, with meticulous attention to the rights, privacy, and welfare of all participants. The ethical protocols were rigorously adhered to, guaranteeing the integrity and reliability of the results.

Sustainability Statement

This study addresses the global challenge of ensuring quality education for all and decent work and economic growth as mentioned by the UNESCO in their SDGs i.e. SDG 4 and SDG 8 (*Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, n.d.; *THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d., p. 17; *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, 2015). Moreover, SDG 4,1, which describes the provision of free, equitable education for both girls and boys from primary education to secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030, SDG 4.4: Increase the number of youth and adults who possess the necessary abilities, including technical and vocational competencies for future professions, entrepreneurship, and employment (Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.; Saini et al., 2023). Additionally, this study also focuses on SDG 4c: to increase the provision of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing countries in 2030 (Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). All 17 sustainable goals are interconnected to each other (Saini et al., 2023) or they are not isolated goals, they are interrelated and reinforce mutually on each other (Boeren, 2019). In addition to SDG4, this study aims to address the sustainability goal 4 which describes *"…promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all"* (Employment, Decent Work for All and Social Protection | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Additionally, this study aims to create a highly qualified teaching force in such rural school contexts in Sri Lanka, in order to achieve an environment with decent work and strong economic growth (Boeren, 2019).

In summary, to investigate the factors contributing the attrition of early career teachers in rural schools in Sri Lanka, a qualitative mathodology was excecuted. To collect data for the thematic analysis, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was used. Seven voluntary graduate and trained teachers were selected by using WhatsApp groups of the teachers' unions. Untrained teachrs and other teachers were excluded. Purposive sampling was employed to select teachers who have the lived experiences of teaching in rural schools across the country. Afetr the regular procedures of the consent, the interviews were conducted wich span from 40-60 minutes. The data was recorded and transcribed and exceuted a thematic analysis using Nvivo 14 software. To secure the trustworthiness of the study, to enhance the credibility and the validity of the sudy, all the data were recorded and transcribed using Nvivo 14 software. Purposive sampling technique enhanced the transferability of the study by selcting the participants based on the relevant to the research objectives. To enhance the confimability, member checking was conducted after collecting data and getting the feedback from the participants. All appropriate measures were meticulously implemented and adhered to in order to uphold the ethical considerations pertaining to the study. Adiitionally, this study addresses the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and 8, focusing on ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promoting decent work for all.

5 Findings and Interpretations

This Chapter demonstrates the data analysis of the qualitative research, based on the interviews conducted with seven teachers who have their lived experience on rural school contexts in Sri Lanka. Seven significant themes i.e. working conditions, personal actors, policy and administration, professional development, community and support, salary and benefits, and cultural and social factors were emerged from the data which aligns with research objectives and the perspectives of the participants. Each of the themes were further sub divided in to sub-themes and are amplified by using excerpts from lived experiences of the interviewees.

Working Conditions

According to the theoretical framework JD-R model, working conditions align to job demands creating significant stress and strain on teachers that could potentially lead them to burnout if the working conditions are deemed unsatisfactory level. When the job expectorations and the workload has become overwhelming, teachers especially in the rural schools struggle to manage their duties and responsibilities effectively ultimately decide to exit the profession early. This theme was further divided in to four sub-themes i.e. resources available, student population of the classroom, and quality of the infrastructure, and the excessive work load.

Resources available

According to the statistics of Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka, more than 96 percent of the government schools do govern by the respective provincial governments (MoE, 2024). Out of these schools, more than 3000 schools operate with a teaching cadre of fewer than ten teachers (MoE, 2024, p. 13). Lack of human and physical resources in a schools coupled with teacher shortages, has created significant stress for the staff. This challenging environment has contributed to high level of burnout among teachers, leading many to consider exiting the profession earlier to their retirement.

All participants had almost similar responses regarding the resources available in rural schools as they struggle with inadequate resources to educate the students who are already underprivileged. One interviewee stressed that, resources provided by the authorities were not properly maintained, so they were no more useful especially the laboratory equipment mainly due to poor school administration.

Teacher 7 who used to work in a school for more than 8 years as the first appointment, stated that:

> *"The authorities have provided enough resources required for a better teaching and learning environment, however, those were not utilized well by the school management, some resources were missing, many of the lab equipment are broken or misplaced as a*

proper laboratory was not established in the school. Smart boards were provided to few classes, but the teachers were not trained to use them for teaching…."

Teacher 4 expressed:

"No photocopy machine available in the school, I cannot give any additional learning materials to students, and even if I want to do it on my own, I have to travel far away to the closest town where a photocopy machine is available and I have to bear the travelling cost and photocopy cost as well since the school have no way of paying such bills."

In essence, amidst the low levels of human and physical resources in rural schools, the teachers experience high level of stress (Admiraal, 2025) which would make the teachers to leave the profession as they experience job burnout as they are striving their maximum to accomplish the set goals but with lack of resources.

Quality of the infrastructure

Quality infrastructure also plays a significant role in making a better working conditions and facilitating the efficient achievement on tasks. Poor infrastructure could lead to increased frustration and prolonged time spent on tasks and elevating job demands. By examining the responses of the research participants, it reveals that they all did not hold positive attitudes on the current status of the infrastructure of school, particularly regarding the school buildings, classroom atmosphere, access to sanitation facilities. According to these participants, school buildings were left alone for long periods lacking necessary maintenance to ensure a safe and healthy teaching environment. This neglect on the part of school management has heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and dissatisfaction among teachers, increasing job demands and hindering the ability of teachers to execute the planned lessons effectively while ensuring a safe environment for both students and teachers in rural schools.

Teacher 1 stated: *"the school buildings were so old and they were not maintained well throughout the past and all the classes were placed in one long hall and separated the classes by book shelves […] and due to disturbance of one class, the other class cannot do the work properly."*

Many of the rural schools have no proper sanitary facilities or the available facilities were not maintained well enough to use.

Teacher 5 expressed:

"The school did not have proper sanitation facilities, somedays not even water, some teachers used to use the toilets at nearby homes, and many of the teachers, including me have no option until they go back to their homes. And we don't drink enough water during the school time as we cannot use any of the toilets in the school premises"

Meanwhile, Teacher 6 highlighted:

"Roof of the classroom buildings was not properly maintained at all, during the rainy season, no one could not do any teaching well as the classrooms get flooded by rainwater pouring down through the holes of the roof."

Teacher 3, which used to teach in a school in an isolated village in central province of the country, yet to reach the school, the teachers have to walk for more than 8 km crossing a river which is broader than 50m.

Teacher 3, who used to teach in isolated school shared:

> *"The only building that we have in our school is well maintained, not by the government officials, but by the school community and the parents of the school, also we don't need much area for the school as we have only 21 students from year 1 to year 11 which is G.C.E O/L class."*

In conclusion, rural schools in the country, exhibit inadequate infrastructure and poorly maintained amenities, which significantly hinder the creation of an effective teaching and learning environment in-return increases the job stress, emotional exhaustion, and less job satisfaction. As a result, these newly appointed teachers in rural school contexts often experience frustration and dissatisfaction owing to the scarcity of infrastructure in the school environment.

Class Size

Generally, the class size of a rural school is very small compared to a school in an urban or semi-urban area. This also depends on the geographical location as well. In some schools there are no students for some classes and some have less than 5 students. The study revealed the similar results. All the teachers who shared their experiences in the interviews expressed that they had a very few students in some classes and mostly many classes with a maximum of 10-15 students comprising a total of 21 to 120 students from year 1 to year 11 which is G.C.E.O/L class. However, the school with the G.C.E.A/L classes, had more than 200 students from year 1 to A/L class. Teacher 5 shared that her school had classes up to year 8 from year 1 and the total came up to 78 students altogether. The school Principals in couple of rural schools have merged two or three adjoining grades together and made one class to minimize the time table clashes due to severe shortage of the teachers. Teaching these merged classes was one of the biggest challenges in rural schools as the academic level of the students were varied and hard to make one lesson plan to whole class and teaching effectively. In these merged classes single teacher had to teach more than one subject including subjects that they were not trained to teach during their teacher training period. Teaching in merged classes and "out-of-field teaching" have made the participants stressed as they have to spend extra time to learn and make lesson plans, assessments, evaluating students on new subjects that they had to teach in addition to what they were trained. Also, they shared some interesting stories when it comes to attendance of the students.

Teacher 3 noted:

> *"All the students in the school do not come to school on Mondays as all the villagers go down to the nearby town to buy the necessary goods and along with them the students also go down to the nearby town do get anything they want and to make anything done such as buying books, and required stationary as no one goes to the town on other days or there is no shop in the village."*

Teacher 6 mentioned,

> *"No any student attends to the school during harvesting season of their parent's farmlands as they also involved in harvesting or looking after their siblings."*

According to the responses of the participants, students of these rural schools do not attend to schools at all during the harvesting period of the farms which their parents engaged. Older students give a

helping hand to their parents in harvesting, while the younger students stay on the farmlands, unable to reach school on their own because their parents are occupied in the farmlands. As a result of this discontinuation in attendance of the students in rural schools, teachers find it challenging to accomplish their set academic goals and making students ready to pass the grade examinations. Overall, merged classes, out-of-field teaching, and irregular attendance of the students has contributed to higher level of job stress, increasing emotional exhaustion, and lowering the psychological well-being, ultimately leading to job burnout in rural government school teachers across the country.

Excessive workload

Workload of a teacher serves as a measure of school climate, which could impact teacher performance in both positive and negative ways (Heffernan et al., 2022; Mang'uu et al., 2021; Tran & Moskovsky, 2024). Through the lens of the JD-R model, the excessive workload of teachers falls under job demands that lead the teachers to stress and job burnout. The in-depth interviews with the participants, revealed that teachers in rural schools experience the excessive workload in both job related and non-related workload such as completing administrative documentation given by the school administration and the administration of the zonal education office. The teachers in rural schools had to teach the subjects that they were not trained to due to the shortage of subject teachers in almost all the rural schools. Additionally, the participants mentioned that the zonal education office frequently send forms and other unnecessary documents requesting to be filled immediately which is not related to teaching and learning process. Many of such documents include completing the application of the National Identity Card (NIC) of the students who is going to sit for G.C.E. O/L Examination, the health reports and vaccination reports that is totally not related to school duties, filling applications regarding participating students in various types of school level, provincial, and national level competitions including sports, drama, music, and arts etc.

Principals in certain rural schools have made mandatory to conduct extra sessions of teaching after the school hours. Teacher1,2,4,6, and 7 revealed that this inflexible working hours imposed by the school principals made them stressed badly as they find it really challenging to find a transport back to their homes which is far away and it becomes really late as they reach home. Moreover, once or twice a month, teachers had to take the children to Colombo (capital city of Sri Lanka) and various cities for National Sports Competitions, aesthetic competitions, which the teachers have to spend one or more days with students as parents rarely accompany their children to such events. These excessive workloads and responsibilities created stress, elevated sate of emotional exhaustion, and job burnout among the early career teachers in rural schools as these events impact their work-life balance significantly. These factors compel rural school teachers to seek alternatives career options as they cannot get transferred until they complete five consecutive years in rural schools.

In conclusion, the interplay of inadequate human and physical resources, poor infrastructure, class size dynamics, and excessive workload created an unsustainable working environment for teachers in rural schools across the country, elevated level of job stress and emotional exhaustion leading to significant job stress which makes the way to job burnout and finally intending early career teachers to exit from their career.

Personal Factors

Personal factors are crucial in understanding the experiences of early career teachers especially in rural school context where unique challenges and opportunities intersect. This theme consists of four sub-themes: work-life balance, family commitments, student behavior, and job satisfaction. These sub-themes play a significant role in shaping the professional lives of teachers and overall well-being of teachers in rural schools. According to the JD-R model, personal factors can be viewed as both job demands and job resources that affect the capacity of the teachers to succeed in their profession. Research participants reported very low satisfaction across all four sub-themes, largely due to their geographical separation from families and loved ones. This distance had hindered their ability to fulfil their family commitments which ultimately had led to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Additionally, challenges related to student behavior n class rooms had escalated their frustration resulting a very low level of job satisfaction.

Work-Life Balance

Work life balance plays a pivotal role of one life who are engaged in a profession as family and employment are essential components of one's life (Wang & Wang, 2024). Work-life balance is crucial for sustaining a team of stable and experienced team of teachers. If the teachers are away from their families and loved ones while working at a rural school, with visiting the families once a week or less than twice a month, that would impact the work-life balance negatively. The participants stated that they could only see their families only on weekends. However, they had to leave their families either on Sundays or early morning of Mondays. This routine family visit was often disrupted when they were required to accompany their students to various events across different parts of the country, sacrificing their only hope of seeing their families and loved ones. This imbalance of personal life and profession has negatively impact on the research participants, especially after they got married, the two spouses had to work in two different places and that had negatively impacted on their personal lives with an increased level of stress, dissatisfaction, which eventually led to job burnout and attrition.

Teacher 3 noted:

> *"I was happy in this school for three years from 2013 until I get married at 2016. After that I couldn't go home at least every weekend due to heavy workload and travel issues as well as there is no one to come to the nearby town across the jungle with me…. [..] my wife was so unhappy as she even works in a rural school farther away from me. But she manages to come home at every weekend… My father passed away and I couldn't be there for his last moment as there is only way of communicating with home through the mobile phone with very weak signal."*

Teacher 5 similarly stressed:

> *"I got married after 4 years of my teaching appointment and I couldn't get a transfer to a close school where my spouse works. Neither she couldn't get the transfer closer to my work place. So, we were at two different places even after marriage…."*

Thus, work-life balance of such teachers who work at rural schools across the country, had profoundly affected by the demands of their professional responsibilities, especially sacrificing their personal time

including the weekends for student–related activities had increased stress and diminished their personal well-being in return compelling them to exit from the profession.

Family Commitments

Falling to engage with family and unable to look after their older parents as they were recruited to work in a remote location from home against their will, impacts negatively as this increase the job stress and decreases job satisfaction and intend them to leave the profession. Teachers frequently struggle with professional responsibilities with family obligations such as expecting newborns, childcare, and household duties which they find it challenging to fulfill the duties of both sections. Therefore, the dual burden can impact the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance which lead them to burnout and affecting the overall well-being forcing them to find alternatives as getting a transfer is really impossible during the first five years.

Teacher 1 noted:

> *"I could not be at home when my father was sick and hospitalised where he passed away. I felt so empthy as the only child I couldn't be aside of him at his last moment."*

When these early career teachers were employed in rural schools located far away from their homes, they often face challenges in attending to their parents and children during emergency situations. This inability to provide care and support would result in enduring emotional distress. These psychoogical issues contribute to increased the job dissatisfaction which made them to seek alternative carrer opportunities allowing them to remain closer to their failies.

Student Behavior

In classrooms, teachers face a significant emotional burden when dealing with physiological and psychological issues of students (Horwood et al., 2024; Mai, 2025). When students exhibit disruptive behavior or uncooperative behavior in classrooms, it impacts the teaching and learning process as well as the personal life of the teachers this leads to increasing stress and emotional exhaustion. To handle such students and incidents, teachers have to invest extra time and energy which eventually impact on well-being of teachers and would lead to spent more of their personal time in planning lessons to cover the time that lost due to challenging behaviors of the students. In addition to those, teachers have to communicate with parents and manage the conflicts take place in classrooms which finally leave no time for them to relax and move in to next lessons or to engage with their personal life. Participants had reported that they had experienced such behaviors in almost all the grades especially upper secondary school which made them exhausted mentally and physically at the end of the day as they are fresh to the field and handle such issues. Thus, challenging student behavior significantly impacts teachers both physically and mentally raising the stress level of teachers to a higher level which lead to job dissatisfaction, burnout and finally attrition.

Teacher 7 stated:

> *"Upper class students often fight for no reason and I have to intervene and end of the I get headache and cannot focus on my lessons and I missed my planned lessons as well [..] I am behind the syllabus and end of the term I have to rush."*

Similarly, Teacher 1 noted:

> *"There are few students in my class who always disturb me in the lesson for getting attention. But I miss my lessons as I have to spend more time on them and settle the class and make them to focus on the lesson. This is so frustrating and a waste of time of mine as well as studios ones [..] parents even come to meet me after the school regarding their ill behavior and it takes my personal time and have to waste my energy again and again on the same matter."*

Thus, the challenging behaviors of the students impacts on teachers by increasing the job stress which lead to emotional exhaustion and job burnout and finally intend to make a decision whether to remain or to leave the profession for the benefit of personal well-being.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a favorable emotion that someone feels from evaluating their profession of the experience that someone gets from work engagement (Eliyana et al., 2019). This is a major factor which determines the employee to leave or remain; employees who are satisfied stay and who are not satisfied intend to leave the job. Many of the teachers hired by the rural schools experience less job satisfaction.

In related to job satisfaction, teacher 1 stressed out:

> *"Daily I travel for more than 60 km to school and back as I feel pity on the poor students. For them, we are the only hope…. with all the other factors such as travelling up and down daily, cost, workload, stress due to pressure from the principal, covering the syllabus, extra work. I thought of quitting the job. But at the end when it comes to results of the students all the hard work is paid off and that is the only satisfaction for all the commitments."*

Teacher 5 similarly mentioned:

> *"The only happiness of the job is results at the end of every year and sending students to the university from the school. Other than that, it's zero job satisfaction."*

In summary, all participants noted that the only job satisfaction that they receive by witnessing the success of their students in national examinations. However, they further expressed in addition to results of their students, job satisfaction is at a very low level. Collectively all the factors such as being away from family and loved ones, living with very limited facilities, limited resources, lack of professional development opportunities, professional, geographical, and social isolation, heavy workload can hinder job satisfaction and had increased the level of stress leading them to find other professions which they can alter these barriers.

Policy and Administration

The theme policy and administration also play a significant role on Job Demands- Resources (JD-R) model, especially in teacher retention in rural school context. Efficient administrative support and effective policies serve as key features that enhance a healthy work environment of teachers, mitigating job demands such as administrative challenges and job insecurity (Zhu et al., 2020). Administrative methods that emphasize transparent communication between teachers and administrative officers, equitable recruitment procedures, and supportive leadership may greatly impact motivation and job satisfaction. On the other hand, insufficient policies may increase demands, resulting an increased job stress which lead to teacher attrition. This theme divided into two sub-themes i.e. administrative support, and recruitment practices.

Administrative Support

This sub theme has mixed responses. However, most of them are negative responses where Teacher 2 and Teacher 3, noted that it was easy to get the transfer done after the mandatory period in a rural school as mentioned in the appointment letter. However, most of the responses of the participants were not at a satisfactory level on administrative support that they received from the zonal and provincial educational offices which stressed them as they had to travel repeatedly to those far away offices to get their administrative tasks done. This had become an exhausting exercise which cost extra energy, money, and escalated the burnout level which compel them to exit the profession.

Teacher 2:

> *"it was easy for me to get my transfer as my principal agreed to release me after the stated period of five years in the same school and he had a good understanding on the hardship that I was going through […] and zonal office and the provincial office agreed to approve my transfer."*

In some provinces, the administrative officers in both schools and zonal educational offices has a good understanding on how these early career teachers suffer during the mandatory period. Thus, they have made the transfers to teachers who completed their mandatory years promptly and released them from the rural schools giving them a relief from the stress that they were undergoing throughout the period.

Teacher 3 stated:

> *"when it comes to school management, the administrative support from the zonal office is not at all satisfactory. They even did not listen to our request on arranging training session on to Mondays as we cannot attend to them on other days. […] but they approved my transfer as I applied it after nine years of remote service which is one year additional to the mandatory period stated on my appointment letter."*

The following example shows how teachers had to waste their time, energy, money, unnecessarily for something that they should receive at the end of compulsory period of rural school teaching.

Teacher 5 stated:

> *"I visited 19 times by taking my personal leaves to get my transfer after serving more than the stated time in a rural school. […] Finally, I got the transfer after spending another additional year in the same rural school."*

Participants had noted that administrative support was at a very low satisfactory level as respective officials in education zones and provincial education offices had ignored the applications of transfers until teachers or school administration inquire about them. This unnecessary delay of administrative tasks in zonal and provincial offices heightened the stress, emotional exhaustion, and diminished the job satisfaction leading to job burnout and attrition.

Recruitment Practices

Based on the responses of the research participants, it was noted that the recruitment policies were not transparent and had not exhibit equality on all teachers who have spent compulsory five years in rural schools. Some of the teachers are recruited in a rural school which is even geographically isolated from other villages and given a mandatory service period of 8 consecutive years at the same school. Whereas another participant had to work for a three-year period in a rural school. And many were given a mandatory period of five years of rural schools. Additionally, the participants noted that teachers' unions are out of reach for the transfer procedure and if a certain teacher had a political connection, getting a transfer done was just a matter of a phone call. Job resources minimize the stress, emotional exhaustion elevated by the demands. However, when resources also heighten the stress level and emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction, burnout level, teachers had sought options of leaving the teaching field.

In conclusion, participants have neutral image about administrative issues which has a lower impact on increasing stress level of rural teachers and lower impact on the retention as well. Supportive administrative procedures in transfers boost job satisfaction whereas unsupportive administrative officials have decreased job satisfaction while increasing burnout and attrition level of the teachers as they were stranded in rural school for more than intended time period without offering them transfers on time. Recruitment practices had made teachers in rural schools across the country had increased the level job stress and feelings of dissatisfaction on profession, emotional exhaustion, and burnout as they stagnated in rural schools for more than that they have to be according to the regulations.

Professional Development

The second theme, professional development is a critical element affecting teacher retention in profession and this helps them to deliver updated knowledge to the students. Previous studies also stated that limited professional development opportunities exacerbate teacher attrition rates (Farmer, 2020; Glazer, 2018; Zhu et al., 2020). In rural school contexts the ability to attend to such programs are very limited. The data were analyzed by using for sub-themes under professional development. In this study

the participants gave diverse responses on opportunities on training programs, mentorship. However, for the other two sub-themes, career advancement, and professional isolation, most responses were almost same.

Training Opportunities

In- depth interviews led to an understanding of how rural teachers in the country viewed training opportunities they receive. Mixed responses were given on training opportunities received to the rural teachers. The policymakers, stake holders organize such training sessions for teachers when necessary. Especially when there is a syllabus change or any revision on examinations or any regulation change.

Teacher 5 stated:

> "*I was given a good opportunity to undergo one-year training program for G.C.E.A/L physics subject by principal and the relevant authorities as I wanted to teach physics for students since there was no physics teacher for the school."*

Similarly, Teacher 2 also stated:

> "*The principal released me to attend to many numbers of in-service training sessions and also, I got the opportunity to get a paid leave for one year to follow a post-graduate diploma in the University, and this is because of the remoteness of the school. So, I think, I got a good opportunity when it comes to training opportunities."*

These responses showed that administration of some rural schools has given the opportunity to the teachers to participate training programs in return the students in the school receive the actual benefit of these sessions. Thus, the teachers who were able to undergo training programs could develop their career as well as developing the academic level of the students of the rural schools as well as supporting teachers to reduce their job stress by updating their fields of teaching, examination regulations, syllabus updates etc. However, in some of the rural schools, administration has not allowed teachers to participate such training events. The inability to participate to such trainings sessions could lead increased stress and dissatisfaction which may lead to emotional exhaustion and job burnout as they are not leveled up with their colleagues in other schools who are updated in such trainings.

Teacher 3 stated:

> *"We requested the relevant authorities to organize the training sessions on Mondays, for us it is easy to attend without going to our school. But they did not respond to such requests and no one in the school could not attend to training sessions as we cannot leave the village due to traveling challenges and threats from the wild animals since no one comes in or out other than Mondays and Fridays from the village."*

Teacher 7 stated:

> *"I was given a good opportunity by the school to attend the training session as I am a teacher for the new subject stream and I have to attend to such training sessions and also given the opportunity to undergo trainings to become a paper making examiner."*

Overall, the participant's responses on training opportunities gives insights that some principals with a positive mindset released the newly appointed teachers to update their knowledge through in-service training and further education programs and ultimately those would benefit the students whereas some administrative officials have not permitted their teachers to update their knowledge by participating to such training sessions. According to the JD-R model, training opportunities plays a pivotal role under the job demands section which reduces the stress levels and emotional exhaustion of teachers as they get exposed to training programs to gain knowledge and guidance to explore the subjects they teach in the schools. However, lack of training sessions and higher professional education opportunities increases the stress level and emotional exhaustion which lead to job burnout and attrition of teachers in rural school context.

Mentorship Programs

Pertovska et al. (2018) stress out that mentoring is a multifaceted, interactive process which occur between individuals varying with levels of experience and expertise, where the most experiences and expertise person provides the necessary support to the colleagues to enhance the efficiency of their work and contribute the objectives of the institute in a better way. Early career teachers need the mentoring programs and it would help them to engage with professional but non-judgmental conversation with mentors (Hobson & Malderez, 2013). Overall, teachers reported a higher degree of satisfaction on mentoring. They noted that the senior teachers provided a useful mentorship program offering a tailor-made approach to their professional development where teacher and mentor shared their ideas on teaching and learning in rural school context. However, they have also noted that very few senior teachers were not supportive and often ignored the early career teachers, failing to provide the guidance and encouragement necessary for their professional growth.

Teacher 5 mentioned:

> *"The senior teachers as well as the principal helped me a lot in integrating to the school culture as I was in a totally different profession before I joined teaching. The teachers helped me even organizing my classroom…"*

Teacher 1 noted:

> *"Some teachers helped me where as the others including the principal was not supportive at all. He was not a good mentor but a dictator."*

These findings highlight that most of the rural schools across the country foster a friendly atmosphere among colleagues and administrative staff, contributing a positive environment which supports early

career teachers in their professional growth and helps to reduce their job stress and emotional exhaustion which led to less burnout. According to the JD-R model, this supportive culture in rural schools across the country acts as a resource that enhance the well-being of the teachers and helps them to retain in the profession. However, it is important to acknowledge that some of the senior teachers in very few rural schools were not supportive and not involved in mentoring programs which led to increase the stress and emotional exhaustion of the early career teachers. This reduces the retention rate of the early career teachers forcing them to find alternatives and quit their profession early.

Career Advancement

Rural school teachers across the country often encounter significant barrier to career advancement due to very limited opportunities for professional development programs. Early career teachers in the rural school context do not get opportunity to engage with training programs, workshops, and higher educational programs related to teaching and school management and administration that could enhance their skill as the priority is given to senior teachers in the schools to such programs leaving the early career teachers with narrow avenue to climb up in the professional ladder. Research participants noted that the competition in career advancement is very high due to limited opportunities available for the early career teachers especially in rural schools. Limited number of online professional development programs run by the universities, lack of online facilities such as internet connections and strong continuous signals to join such programs online had hindered their career advancement opportunities as well. In addition to those, they could not focus on career advancement programs as the school administration does not approve academic leave due to limited staff in rural schools, travelling challenges to the universities or any respective institutions regularly from rural areas, limited time to focus on higher education due to excessive professional workload etc. The following excerpts from interviewee's responses align with limited opportunities that they have in their career advancement.

Teacher 1 stated:

> *"[..] many teachers leave the profession as there is a high uncertainty on the career advancement. I also have a feeling of leaving teaching as I cannot go up in the ladder of grades as I do not get chance to follow any further education program staying in rural school."*

Teacher 6 similarly noted:

> *"[..] I joined as a primary teacher in 2003 and so far, I could complete my bachelor degree and I don't have time and opportunity to follow any program to become a head teacher or to be a principal, to become a director in primary education…."*

In essence, many early career teachers in rural schools across the country, feel stagnated in their career only as a teacher which created a job dissatisfaction, higher level of emotional exhaustion, and likelihood of leaving the career in-order to find careers where career advancement is possible.

Professional Isolation

> *"Professional isolation refers to a state when a professional individual experiences a sense of isolation from his/her professional peers, while lacking mentoring and opportunities for professional interaction, collaboration and development and is a multidimensional concept which may be either geographic, social, and/or ideological."* (Bissessar, 2022, p. 5).

Inside the school buildings, amongst many adults and children, individual teachers get isolated (Sindberg, 2011) as they are fully occupied in teaching walking from classroom to another, preparing assessments, evaluating students, etc. This feeling of professional isolation is experienced once a particular individual left the workplace to another new place or with the change of career. Overall, the participants indicated that they received very limited opportunities to engage with their peers in other schools as they could not attend to events such as professional training, career development programs. Since only one subject teacher available for a subject, there was no any way to discuss any subject related matter within the school premises and it was really challenging to settle certain subject matters they face while dissimilating the subject to students as they are professionally isolated. This has made them frustrated and stressed as they do not find anyone in the school to share their subject matters and find solution openly.

Teacher 3 noted:

> *"[..] for nine consecutive years I was in that totally isolated school and I barely be able to meet any of my peers from another school as it is really challenging to travel even to the nearby town in a weekday alone [..] after getting the transfer to a school in the city, I never knew the proper way to apply a short-leave as I have never taken a short leave in my professional life."*

This lack of interaction among peer teachers not only hindered their professional growth, but also it has contributed to feelings of professional isolation, which could adversely affect job satisfaction and seeking other professions especially in early career teachers in rural school context across the country.

In essence, according to the responses of the research participants, the four sub-themes i.e. training opportunities, career advancement, mentorship programs, and professional isolation show both positive and negative aspects on the theme professional development. Generally, early career teachers in rural schools get certain fraction of training opportunities to develop their profession where as they receive very limited career advancement opportunities as there is a high competition to climb up on the career. However, mentors have worked closely with early career teachers and helped them to mingle with the school culture and to get a clear picture of the school environment which has helped them to retain in the profession according to JD-R model especially under job resources which reduces the job stress and emotional exhaustion. Finally, early career teachers in rural schools across the country had experienced a higher level of professional isolation due to limited opportunities to interact with their peer in neighboring schools and elevated stress, emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction leading them to exit from teaching.

Compensation and Benefits

Compensation and benefits play a significant role in attracting and retaining teachers (Imazeki, 2005; Kelly, 2004), especially in challenging environments such as rural schools, geographically isolated schools. Among these, salary and benefits, incentives and bonuses, and transport support are significant factors influencing job satisfaction and professional commitment of the teachers. Under this theme, the experiences of the participants on their salary, and incentives and bonuses are revealed.

Salary Levels

The public sector salary scales influence the capacity of the government significantly to attract, retain, and motivate high-caliber personnel, hence enhancing service delivery effectively (Finan et al., 2017). In the story of teachers, particularly in challenging contexts such as rural schools, salary plays a significant role in retaining and motivating the teachers who are currently engage in teaching. According to JD-R model, salary plays a significant role under the job resources which increase the job satisfaction and decrease burnout and intention to leave the profession. Research participants noted that their salary scales were drastically lower than the other government sector servants who have similar academic qualifications. This lower salary levels had impacted significantly on rural teachers as they bear an extra cost for food and temporary accommodation as they are geographically away from their homes. Additionally, they had to pay a heavy transport cost on every weekend as they commute using public transport to see their families and back to work. These extra expenditures had severely impacted on their job satisfaction, and escalated their stress, emotional exhaustion, leading to burnout and seeking options to change the career with higher remuneration.

On the salary level, Teacher 1 expressed:

> *"My salary is not enough to cover my travel expense, to pay utility bills, and after paying the loan installment, there is nothing on my hand. [..] no money to go to a movie or to watch a stage play with my family."*

Teacher 7 had a similar opinion on salary:

> *"Daily, I travel on the highway form more than 100 km and [..] a taxi to the school and back. When I get a leave, my spouse is happy as it is a saving as it costs more than I earn for a month's transport"*

This revealed that the travelling cost had increased the daily wage of a teacher which made it a saving as the teachers takes a leave as it is a paid leave and saves the travelling cost as well.

Similarly, Teacher 5 said:

> *"I ask extra from my parents as I get nothing after paying for boarding house, on food, and travel. I don't know what should I do, trying again and again for a transfer or just quit."*

This explains that teachers get a lower scale of salary compared to the other professions in the country as they have not enough savings to spent on recreation and in any emergency situation. Many of the teachers who work at rural schools have to spend on their salary mainly on travel expenses, lodging closer to the school and also for the food, which it makes them emotionally exhausted and dissatisfied on their job according to job resources, a salary, if it is less and not enough to make a month, it would impact on them negatively on well-being, job satisfaction, and increase job burnout and intend to leave the profession.

Allowances

Only Teacher 3, and Teacher 6 stated that they get an allowance for their salary as they are recruited in a geographically isolated rural school where as other participants mentioned that they do not receive any incentive or any bonus other than the salary at the end of every month.

Teacher 3:

> *"I get an allowance of Rs.2500 (around 8 USD) per a month as I teach in a rural school. But it is not enough to cover food expenses for one week as I stay in a staff accommodation."*

Teacher 6 said:

> *"I get an allowance added to the salary, however, it is enough for paying the taxi fee for a week or more if I miss the one and only bus to the closest location to school."*

According to these findings, the teachers in the country basically do not receive any additional incentive or a bonus unless their school is located in a geographically isolated location where no one could reach easily and no teacher is willing to work there. Even though, rural teachers receive a certain amount of travelling cost added to their salary, it was not enough to cover their travelling expenses at least for a week.

Overall, lower salary and benefits that teachers received has impacted them significantly escalating stress level, dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion as their salary and travelling allowance were not on a satisfactory level.

Community and Support

The theme community and support pays a vital role in shaping the experiences of teachers especially early career teachers in rural schools where there are not many resources and opportunities for professional growth. The Job Demands–Resources model shows how community and support are important to teachers which help them to deal with job demands and make them more resilient. The theme community and support comprise two sub-themes, namely community engagement, and peer relationships. Bull et al. (2008) stressed out that a healthy teacher- parent community relationship heps

students to escalate in education reducing the stress level of the teachers. Thus commuity could be considered as a job resource which help teachers to remain in the profession.

Community Engagement

The sub-theme community engagement describes the support the teachers receive from the community of the geographical location of the school. Majority of the rural village community consists of underprivileged an economically disadvantaged people. Thus, the rural community welcome teachers and respect them well as very few teachers stay in schools for longer periods to educate their younger generation. All the participants noted the engagement of the rural community was very satisfactory as they voluntarily come to schools and engage with many tasks supporting the school administration and even teachers to function the school well. Even though the community operates at a low socioeconomic level, its members actively contribute their manpower to various school activities such as cleaning school premises before starting every school term, removing solid wastes to mitigate dengue fever spread among school children, demonstrating a strong sense of collective responsibility.

Teacher 3, reveled:

> *"the villagers wait at the end of the road where any taxi or any motorcycle could go on every Monday afternoon as the teachers who have gone home on Fridays to return to school. The villagers also come down from their village to buy the goods they need for the coming week and accompany the teachers who reach to the small boutique and walk the rest of the distance with them as there are wild elephants on their way [..] some parents serve even food or dry ration to the teachers as the teachers have to buy everything and carry a long way from town to the school quarters."*

Teacher 7 stated:

> *"the school development committee, or the parents of the school are highly supportive in any event of the school, they even help to organize the school sports-meet, or accompany the students along with the teachers if the teachers have to take the students to anywhere for a particular event or a competition."*

Teacher 2 noted:

> *"Many of the parents usually come to school in the morning and clean the school premises including the classrooms and prepare the school setting to start the day. The parents engage this duty voluntarily and they do it happily with smile on their face."*

In conclusion, higher level of community engagement in rural school settings across the country had reduced the job stress, emotional exhaustion of teachers elevating the job satisfaction engagement and reducing the burnout rete.

Peer Relationships

In schools, the peers are become very familiar as there are not much staff members in total. The schools do not have many different departments or sections to make the staff members to become strangers to each other. In rural schools the peer relationship becomes much stronger as they are geographically away from their families and loved ones, away from their society and other communities. Thus, good peer relationships become a stronger factor for teachers to retain in the profession reducing the job stress, and emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Additionally, peer relationship helps them to minimize to a certain level of professional isolation.

Teacher 3 stressed:

> *"The whole staff was only male teachers and stayed in one building and used it as a bachelor quarters. One teacher cooked meals for all 5 teachers according to a roaster. In an absence of one peer, the rest cover his lessons until the absentee returns to duties."*

These experiences clearly mention how important the peer relationship in the professional life to complete the duties and responsibilities of teaching without getting exhausted.

Overall research participants reported a higher degree of satisfaction on community engagement and peer relationships. All participants noted that rural community was highly supportive reflecting the richness of traditional Sri Lankan cultural values and hospitality and they have strong peer relationship as all teachers were geographically away from their families and loved ones. Residing all male teachers in bachelor quarters had a significant impact on peer relationship among each other. Shared meal experience fosters a sense of camaraderie and belonging, allowing them to talk about their problems and successes. These kinds of interactions build their personal relationships and a supportive network that could alleviate feelings of isolation reducing job stress, dissatisfaction, emotion exhaustion and increasing job satisfaction and engagement which help them to remain in profession.

Cultural and Social Factors

The final theme of the analysis, cultural and social factors a, have also played a pivotal role in attrition of early career rural school teachers. As job resources, these factors tend to reduce the stress level of the teachers and increase the work engagement. The theme was sub-divided into two as cultural expectations and social status of teachers.

Cultural Expectations

Veenman (1984) has expressed the cultural shock that early career teachers experience with a comparison between what they lean during the teacher training sessions and what they experience in the real classrooms which is dramatic and traumatic. Participants noted that they have similar experiences

on cultural expectations. After graduating from teacher training school, or from the university, participants and witnessed the difference between what they have learned there is not what they experienced in the real rural school context. One participant revealed that this harsh reality on rural schools had made many of her colleagues to leave school and not appeared again as they could not face the hardship of the rural school context with adequate resources and limited facilities in schools.

Teacher 5 stressed:

> *"I could not organize my lessons as I was in a shock after seeing the harsh reality of the career in rural school. This was not the picture drawn in our minds by our lecturers in the training."*

Teacher 3 noted that:

> *"In the first few days I didn't teach anything as I had no idea how to start and continue teaching in this rural school as I was not prepared for this. But I managed myself after spending some time with the nature and walking along the lone walking paths through forests."*

This statements showed how these early career teachers experienced the difference between the reality of the rural schools with lack of facilities in school and what these teachers were taught in teacher colleges and university period. As a result of this drastic difference between what they have expected and what they experienced, a higher degree of stress and emotional exhaustion resulted job burnout and led to attrition.

Social Status of Teachers

All research participants expressed that they were well treated and respected by the rural community as they were the teachers of their younger generation. Teachers were treated in a similar way that rural community treat the village headman and the clergymen in temples. This appraisal of the community had made teachers to work efficiently disregarding the cultural shock they experience in rural schools, pressure exerted by the school administration, job dissatisfaction due to various job demands influencing retention instead of attrition.

Teacher 6 noted:

> *"I was treated like a god by all the villagers as if I came from heaven to save their children's future. They did not let me to carry my bags even. They did everything that they could do for teachers in the school."*

The rural cultures, teachers were held in high regard, and considered teachers were sent to change the fate of their children's' future. So the village community pay a huge respect on these teachers which made them to elevate the job satisfaction, work engagement, improved well-being and reducing the stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and job burnout. One significant fact that rural school teachers to retain in the profession is this social status of the teachers in rural context.

In summary, newly appointed teachers to rural schools across the country experience a cultural shock as they were aware of the reality while they were studying to become teachers back in their teacher colleges and universities. This has impacted significantly on these teachers to increase their job stress, emotional exhaustion, leading to burnout and attrition. However, in rural areas across the country, community treat teachers in a respectable way and they help teachers in many different ways even inside the school and outside. This respect and higher social status to teachers have helped teachers to increase their job satisfaction, well-being and retention in the career as it reduces the emotional exhaustion, stress level and burnout.

6 Discussion

This chapter presents the discussion and examinations of the research: exploring early career teacher attrition in rural government schools in Sri Lanka. The discussion aligns with the two research questions in relation with the literature overview and theoretical framework: Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The study aims to understand the factors that influence early career teacher attrition in rural schools in Sri Lanka and to what extent these factors are incorporated within their professional experiences influencing their decisions to leave the profession prematurely. Data collected through semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed. This resulted 7 themes according to the theoretical framework. The first three themes based on job demands which heighten the stress, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, job burnout and attrition whereas remaining four themes were under job resources which increases work engagement, job retention, well-being by reducing emotional exhaustion, stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout.

Working conditions demanding factor which impacts on teachers as they have to strive their utmost to accomplish the set goals by the management with the available resources in the school. The results showed in rural schools across Sri Lanka have inadequate working conditions. Resources needed for efficient teaching and learning process was a scarce in almost all the rural schools. Teachers who work with minimum resources and trying to achieve the set goals had elevated their stress level, leading to job burnout and compelling to decide to leave the profession. Similarly, unattended school buildings, laboratories without a proper care and maintenance, poor sanitation facilities, poorly managed electronic devices had impacted early career teachers significantly in their teaching sessions in classrooms as they could not perform well and deliver the subject knowledge to the students. Furthermore, over populated classrooms due to merging several grades together due to shortage of teaching staff in schools, having all the classes in one large hall without cladding had disturbed adjoining classes throughout the school time making it impossible for teachers to teach and students to learn. Finally, the heaviest factor that impacted early career teachers in working conditions were the excessive workload. Principals have imposed after school session on extra teaching, filling administrative documents which were not related to teaching and learning process sent to be filled immediately by the administrative offices, accompanying students to various types of competitions even on holidays had increased their workload from excessive to unbearable level.

Personal factors i.e. work-life balance, family commitments, student behavior, and job satisfaction are another set of sub-themes under job demands. All participants mentioned that is has become an impossible target to achieve the balance between the professional life and personal life. Regular travelling from school to home and back in weekends had affected not only the teachers but also their families and loved ones. Early career teachers in rural schools were not able to fulfil their family commitments as they meet their families and loved ones weekly or once every fortnight. Making both parties stressed and exhausted as they had to long wait to see them each other. Challenging student behavior, students with physiological and psychological issues also impacted the stress level of teacher as they are new to the field and has less experience in handling such issues in practical life. Job satisfaction, which is connected to almost all the factors as they positively or negatively affect the job

satisfaction of early career teachers in rural schools across the country. According to the participants, the one and only factor that increase their job satisfaction was the academic achievements of their students especially in national level examinations Based on the response of the participants, the above factors had impacted on them significantly to increase their stress, professional burnout, emotional exhaustion which led to attrition before they reach to their retirement age.

Policy and administration plays a pivotal role in reducing demands and increasing the retention rate in teaching (Zhu et al., 2020). The sub theme, administrative support has showed both positive and negative responses as some of zonal and provincial educational offices had attended to the matters of rural school teachers immediately whereas some zonal and provincial offices had not attended at all by neglecting transfer applications of teachers who had completed numbers of years as mentioned in their appointments. Thus the administrative support had played a moderate role when considering the depth that it influenced rural teachers to exit their profession. However, recruitment practices have had significant negative impact on attracting teachers to rural schools across the country particularly due to the imposition of a five-year mandatory service requirement on for newly hired teachers against their will. This regulation had heightened the stress levels of early career teachers as they had to face many challenges such as securing a safe accommodation, reliable transportation, which adversely affect their physiological and psychological well-being. Another challenge that the participants highlighted was the irregularity of allocating teachers to rural schools enabling the teachers who were already in such hard-to-staff school to get transfers after their mandatory period. This recruitment practices have emerged as a significant factor contributing the early career teachers to leave the profession prematurely especially in rural schools across the country as it has affected their physical and psychological well-being by increasing the job stress, dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion.

Senior teachers in rural schools have mentored early career teachers who are new to the field making the comfortable on rural school context. These early career teachers had gained a broader knowledge on the rural school conduct and adaptations from what they have learned in their training programs. Thus mentoring has played a significant role by reducing the stress, emotional exhaustion, and job burnout due to job demands and making a healthier environment for the teachers to retain in the profession. Therefore, mentoring has decreased the early career attrition of teachers especially in rural schools. Additionally, training opportunities have moderately impacted on making teachers to exit from what they love to engage. On the contrary, reflecting the responses of the participants, career advancement, professional isolation has significantly impacted on teacher attrition across the country especially in rural school setting. Teachers reported that they have very limited career advancement opportunities as they could not continue their higher education dwelling in rural villages with lack of facilities and hurdles in schools. Techers who have expectations of career advancements would not be able to fulfil their goals while staying in the profession especially in rural schools. Thus, career advancement has significantly impacted to the teacher attrition as limited career advancement had increased job stress, dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, psychological well-being of early career teachers who were recruited to rural schools against their will. Finally, teachers in rural schools often experience professional isolation due to limitations in meeting their colleagues due to infrequent career development and in-service training opportunities, which restricts opportunities for knowledge sharing on subject matters and career challenges. Furthermore, a single teacher is usually assigned to teach a particular subject for the whole school as there are no parallel classes in each grade. As a result of these factors, early career teachers in rural school context experienced professional isolation within the workplace and heightened the stress level, diminished the job satisfaction due to lack of job resources that compelled to seek alternative opportunities that could alleviate stress level, reduce emotional exhaustion, and enhance overall job satisfaction and well-being.

Salary is also considered as one of the most significant factors that makes teachers to leave the career (Imazeki, 2005; Kelly, 2004). Compared to private schools, government school teachers receive a low salary (Imazeki, 2005). According to responses of the participants, the salary scales for teachers are notably lower than those of colleagues in other fields with comparable academic qualifications. According to them, the salary is not enough for their travelling, food and accommodation expenses added in addition to their family maintenance as they are recruited in rural schools. Rural school teachers receive an allowance in addition to their salary to help cover expenses associated with their recruitment. However, this allowance had not met the minimum costs incurred while living away from their families and homes and not even cover their weekly travel expenses. In conclusion, salary levels and other allowances that rural teachers received were not sufficient to sustain them for a month. According to job resources, this situation has heightened the stress level, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion of early career teachers in rural schools in a significant level forcing them to find alternatives.

Last but not least, community and support, job resource had shown a significant impact on reducing the job stress, emotional exhaustion, and increasing job satisfaction of the early career teachers in rural schools across the country. All participants reported that parents of the students have actively engaged in school activities providing support to teachers in various ways. This community support has enabled newly appointed teachers to manage their daily school activities, as parents voluntarily offer labor assistance where necessary as they cannot afford any financial support to the school. Additionally, peer relationship also had impacted on newly appointed teachers in an effective way to reduce their stress as they were new to the rural school context as well as to school teaching. Thus, community support and the peer relationships had least impacted on early career teacher attrition especially in rural schools across the country as these factors had increased the job satisfaction, physical and psychological well-being of early career teachers.

Finally, the cultural and social factors have showed a moderate impact on attrition of the early career teachers in rural government school across the country. One of the two sub-themes, cultural expectations has had a significant impact on teachers. They experienced the cultural shock (Veenman, 1984) when confronted with the realities of rural school context, which were the total opposite of what they had learned during their training in teacher colleges and universities. This cultural shock had increased their emotional exhaustion, psychological well-being, job stress, and job dissatisfaction leading them to leave the profession. However, social status of teacher impacted the newly appointed teachers have significantly reduced the attrition rates as it had increased job satisfaction, psychological well-being of teachers in rural schools. Thus cultural and social factors have moderately impacted on early career teacher attrition in rural schools across the country.

7 Conclusion

This chapter presents the summary of the results of the data collected and analyzed. Furthermore, this chapter summarizes the factors that influenced early career teachers in rural government school teachers to leave the profession prematurely and to what extent these factors are incorporated within their professional experiences influencing their decisions to leave the profession prematurely according to the job demands-resources model.

From the seven themes derived from data analysis aligned with job demands-resources model. Working conditions, personal factors, and professional development each were sub divided into four sub-themes. While, the other themes, policy and administration, compensation and benefits, community and support, and cultural and social factors, each were divided in to two sub-themes. From the theme, working conditions, resources available, excessive workload, class size, and quality of the infrastructure had significantly impacted on attrition of the early career teachers who were appointed to the rural schools against their will. Due to the recruitment to the rural schools which was away from family and loved ones these teachers had to sacrifice their family commitments, work-life balance to serve the students of rural schools where the larger classes made by merging different grades together and the behavior of students. Academic excellence of their students were the only factor that made them happy about their career in rural schools as these students were socioeconomically under privileged. These factors also heightened their job stress, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction, and lowered their physiological and psychological well-being leading them to seek alternative career opportunities in other fields which increase the well-being and job satisfaction and reduce emotional exhaustion and job stress. Recruitment practices also had severely impacted on teachers to increase their stress levels and psychological well-being while administrative support had moderately impacted on attrition of these early career teachers in rural schools. Furthermore, salary levels, incentives and allowances, cultural expectations also had significant impacts on these early career teachers in rural government schools across the country compelling them to search alternative career pathways which reduce their stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and increase the job satisfaction. Additionally, career advancement opportunities, professional isolation also impacted them significantly by increasing the stress, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and lowering their physiological and psychological well-being which led to job burnout and pre-mature attrition. Even though, the training opportunities were scare, it has impacted moderately on attrition of these early career teachers. On the other hand, mentorship programs, community engagement, peer relationships, and social status of teachers in rural areas were lesser impact on teacher attrition rates of these newly appointed teachers.

Limitations of the study

One of the main limitations of this study is the population size. Due to a limited time allocation for the study, a very few number of teachers were interviewed and it is challenging to generalize the results of this study. The results of this study is specific to the rural school settings in Sri Lanka and it is difficult

to apply the study results to other settings. The research participants do not represent four out of seven provinces of the country where this shows a certain amount of homogeneity. In addition to that, the sample was selected through WhatsApp groups of the teacher unions. Due to this selection mechanism, rural teachers who are not active in such groups, rural teachers who promoted to principals or higher managerial levels were not able to select. Thus, this study lacks their experiences as they were the part of these teachers of the rural school setting. If they were to be in the sample, this study would be more insightful. Additionally, no teachers from the national schools which are located at urban and semi urban areas across the country were not selected as they do not have the teaching experiences in rural school context. Furthermore, another significant limitation of this study is the potential bias in the sample selected. The sample consists of only graduate teachers and trained teachers, which may not provide a comprehensive representation of the broader teaching population of the country. This exlusion of untrained teachers, other teachers, and other categories of educators has limited the generalizibility of the research findings.

Implications

This study could be validated by carrying out a quantitative research with a larger population size which the results could be generalized. Also, this study could be used to identify the main challenges faced by the early career teachers of the country who are recruited far away from their homes and in to the rural settings of the country and also to amend the policies and current teacher recruiting procedures of the country.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed consent letter

Malitha Daminda De Silva

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2025-04-08

Informed Consent Letter

Dear Research participant,

I am conducting a research study titled "**VOICES FROM THE FIELD: EXPLORING TEACHER ATRITION IN RURAL SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA**" as part of my International Masters in Educational Research (IMER) program at faculty of education and special education, University of Gothenburg. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by government school teachers in rural areas of Sri Lanka which lead to job burnout and early career attrition and proposing suggestion to increase teacher retention in such hard to staff schools in remote rural areas.

Your Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a brief interview. The total time commitment is approximately would be maximum 30 minutes.

Confidentiality

All information collected during this study will be kept confidential. Your responses will be anonymized, and no identifying information will be included in any reports or publications resulting from this research. Data will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in this study involves minimal risk. However, if you experience any discomfort, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Your insights will greatly contribute to understanding the experiences of government school teachers and may help improve conditions in the education sector.

Right to Withdraw

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, without any negative consequences. If you choose to participate, you may also decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me at +46 76 96 54805 or gusmanimma@student.gu.se

Consent

By signing below, you consent to participate in this study and acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for considering participation in this important research.

Sincerely,

Malitha Daminda De Silva

Appendix B: Semi structured Interview questionnaire

1. Warming up questions: can you tell me about your name, your age, and a brief description about yourself please?
2. Tell me about your academic background: do you have a teaching qualification?
3. Tell me about your career: when did you join as a teacher? What is the grading scale that you belong according to the academic qualifications as a beginning teacher? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
4. What is the school of your first appointment? What type of school was it? What is the subject you are qualified to teach? Did you get the same subject that you are qualified to teach in the school? Did you get any other subjects to teach as well?
5. Did you get any other extra-curricular activities to coordinate?
6. Did you get any administrative documentation to complete from the school and zonal administration? If yes, in what ways that these documentations affected your career?
7. Was it a rural school? If so, how far from your home? How did you travel to the school and back? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
8. Did you get staff quarters from the government or you had to find it on your own accommodation? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
9. How do you find the school environment to you? Was it supportive? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
10. What about the working environment in the school? What was the student population of classes you taught? How did you find the cooperation of the students in your lessons? How about the support of the peers and administrative staff of the school and the zonal office?
11. What about the human and physical resources available in the school? Did you find the basic needs in the school premises? Did you find enough teaching and learning materials for your lessons? Can you describe about these resources and availability of them?
12. What do you think of the career development opportunities that you received during this period? Do you think that you got the chance to participate for those sessions? Can you explain about those? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
13. What do you think of getting the opportunity to pursue any career related higher educational programs during this period? Did you get any support from your administration and colleagues for such programs? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
14. What do you think of being a teacher in rural school with a small group of colleagues and with a minimum amount of resources available? Do you find it as a professional isolation or do you enjoy being in a rural school teacher? (Follow up questions based on responses to explore further)
15. How do you feel about the support that you received from the community and parents? Can you elaborate with couple of experiences that you have?
16. What about the salary and other benefits you receive? Do you think that it is sufficient for your expenses and your family commitments?
17. How would you describe your overall job satisfaction? If you are satisfied with your job, what specific aspects contribute for that? Or if you are not happy with your job, in what ways? Can you describe in detail?
18. What do you think of the teacher recruitment procedure and policies of the government? Are you happy with the present procedure? What are the changes that you would think that should take place in this procedure?
19. What about the social status of the teachers in rural schools and urban schools? How do you feel it as you are a teacher of a rural school?
20. Do you have anything to add for this conversation that you think it would be helpful for the study?

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION