

Teachers' Experiences, Motivation, Challenges and Opportunities on the Expanded Career Progression System of the Department of Education

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expanded career progression system (ECPS);
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Abstract. This study explores teachers' lived experiences, motivations, challenges, perceived opportunities, and coping strategies regarding the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) of the Department of Education. Existing literature emphasizes that structured career pathways enhance teacher motivation, retention, and professional identity; however, limited qualitative research examines how teachers interpret and navigate such reforms in practice. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, this study investigated how ECPS fulfills or constrains teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study addressed the central question: How do teachers experience and make sense of the ECPS in terms of motivation, challenges, opportunities, and coping? It was hypothesized that ECPS functions both as a professional growth mechanism and a source of systemic strain depending on contextual supports. A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design was employed. Participants were purposively selected public elementary school teachers in Northwestern Cagayan with direct ECPS involvement. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenological analysis until data saturation was reached. Findings revealed a dynamic coexistence of stress and professional validation. Teachers reported documentation burden, time constraints, and evaluation anxiety, yet also expressed motivation rooted in recognition, financial stability, leadership aspirations, and competence development. Coping strategies included systematic documentation, time management, collegial collaboration, and growth-oriented reframing. The study concludes that ECPS strengthens professionalization when institutional supports align with reform demands. These findings inform policy refinement and the development of structured teacher support systems to ensure sustainable and equitable career progression implementation.

Introduction

The career progression of teachers is widely recognized as a crucial factor influencing their motivation, retention, teaching quality, and overall effectiveness within the educational system. In the Philippine public school context, many teachers experience slow or uncertain promotion processes, often waiting several years before advancing from Teacher I to higher ranks despite meeting qualifications. For instance, teachers frequently express frustration over limited plantilla positions, leading to situations where even highly competent and experienced educators remain in the same rank for a long time. This stagnation can result in decreased morale, reduced enthusiasm in teaching, and in some cases, decisions to leave the profession or seek opportunities abroad. In rural and under-resourced areas, teachers often take on additional roles such as administrative work, community coordination, and remedial instruction without corresponding recognition or career advancement. These lived experiences highlight the need for a more structured and transparent career progression system that aligns with international recommendations emphasizing clear pathways to sustain teacher commitment and performance.

In response to these longstanding challenges, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS), which aims to provide multiple career pathways that recognize diverse competencies, including leadership, specialization, and instructional expertise. This reform is particularly significant for teachers who have long felt that career advancement was limited to administrative roles such as becoming a school head, thereby neglecting those who wish to remain in classroom teaching while advancing professionally. Under the ECPS, teachers can pursue differentiated tracks, offering opportunities for growth without necessarily leaving their teaching roles. However, in practice, teachers report challenges such as unclear guidelines, limited orientation, and concerns about fair implementation across schools. Some educators are still uncertain about how to qualify for specific tracks or how the system will address existing inequities in promotion. Despite these concerns, the ECPS represents a major policy shift that directly impacts the professional lives of thousands of public school teachers, making it a critical area for educational research and policy evaluation.

Studies on teacher career development have shown a strong connection between motivation and job satisfaction. These stem from a variety of theories, including the Career Development Theory and Self-Determination Theory which highlights that, autonomy, competence, and professional recognition are qualities of sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Numerous systematic reviews and meta-analyses show that career opportunities foster teachers' professional identity and commitment, particularly with transparent and supportive progression systems (Borman & Dowling, 2018; Kraft et al., 2020). Existing studies on the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) mainly emphasize policy design, structure, and expected outcomes, but they give limited attention to the actual experiences of teachers who implement and are affected by the system. There is insufficient understanding of how teachers interpret and make sense of the ECPS in relation to their professional identity and career goals. Additionally, little is known about how teachers cope with the added demands of the system, such as increased workload, documentation requirements, and performance expectations.

Working to close this gap is crucial because teachers' lived experience will yield vital evidence to assess whether career progression reforms are practical, equitable and sustainable. For that reason, this study aims to help the literature by providing a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of the Expanded Career Progression System of the Department of Education. Thus, bridging the gap between policy intention and professional reality.

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher utilized qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to find out the experiences, reasons, challenges, opportunities, and coping strategies of teachers on the Expanded Career Progression System of the DepEd. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with lived experience. It acknowledges that meaning is given to people in their experience differently because of their history, situation, and relationship.

Setting of the Study

The study was carried out in selected public elementary schools within the jurisdiction of the Department of Education in the Northwestern part of Cagayan. These schools are a part of the national basic education system that formulates and implements teacher career advancement policies and programs like the ECPS.

Participants of the Study

The respondents of the study were six (6) public elementary school teachers employed under the Department of Education who have actual experience of the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS). Elementary teachers were selected because they are involved in classroom-based teaching while simultaneously experiencing the demands and expectations of the ECPS. To select a strategic sample of participants who could provide rich information on the phenomenon under study, purposive sampling was used. To be part of the study, participants had to (1) be currently working as public elementary school teachers, (2) have knowledge of or have been involved in ECPS-related activities like promotion application, portfolio preparation, participation in ECPS-based professional development, and (3) be willing to be interviewed or talk. The number of participants was dictated by data saturation; that is, data collection was continued until no new patterns and meanings were apparent and no new significant information was emerging.

Research Instrument

The study primarily employed the use of a semi-structured interview guide, developed by the researcher, to gather information about the lived experiences of the public elementary school teachers regarding the Expanded Career

Progression System (ECPS) by the Department of Education. The interview guide was semi-structured consisting of open-ended questions regarding the research problems of the study. The questions were aimed at drawing out in-depth descriptions of the teachers' experiences, motivations, challenges, perceived opportunities, and coping strategies. To establish content validity, a panel of expert educators in educational management and qualitative research reviewed the interview questions. After receiving the feedback, revisions were made accordingly for clarification, relevance and adherence to study objectives. A teacher from a public elementary school who was not part of the participants was also interviewed to assess if the questions were clear and flowed well.

Data Gathering Procedure

Initially, the researcher gets permission from the involved school authorities and administrators to perform the study. After approval, prospective participants were identified to fit the inclusion criteria of being public elementary school teachers who have experience or familiarity with the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS). The reason for the investigation, steps to follow, and moral principles were clearly explained to the subjects. Informed consent from all participants was received prior to data collection. The third method used for data collection was mainly through individual in-depth interview using the semi-structured interview guide prepared by the researcher. Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the interviewee either face to face or over the web when necessary. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The researcher used probing questions and reflective listening during the interviews to encourage participants to elaborate upon their experiences and interpretations. Interviews were done continuously until the data saturation point reached, which means no new theme developed, and or an important insight.

Data Analysis

To ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data, all the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Discourse referring to meaningful statements was carefully analyzed and interpreted to identify emerging patterns of meaning. Meanings that were conceptually similar were organized into broader themes, illustrating their shared nature across participants. The researcher maintained analytic memos throughout this stage to document insights, reflections and interpretations. The themes were merged into a story that revealed what the teachers lived through as they move with the extension of career progression system. In assisting with interpretations, teacher voices were maintained by quoting participants directly.

Ethical Considerations

The privacy and confidentiality of participants were strictly protected. Personal identifiers were not used in any transcripts, reports, or publications. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym or code, and any information that could directly or indirectly identify individuals, schools, or institutions was removed or generalized. Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and consent forms were stored in password-protected digital files and secure physical storage accessible only to the researcher. Participation was strictly voluntary, and teachers were clearly informed that their decision to participate or decline would not influence their employment status, performance evaluation, professional relationships, promotion opportunities, or standing within the Department of Education. Potential participants were given sufficient time to review the informed consent form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate.

Results and Discussion

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Excerpts
1. Emotional Responses to ECPS Engagement	1.1 Overwhelm, Anxiety, and Uncertainty	<i>"Honestly, I felt overwhelmed at first. The detailed criteria and numerous documents required seemed intimidating."</i>
		<i>"When I first engaged with ECPS, I felt both hopeful and stressed."</i>
		<i>"I felt uncertain and slightly intimidated."</i>
	1.2 Excitement and Determination	<i>"My experience navigating the Expanded Career Progression System has been largely positive and energizing."</i>
<i>"However, alongside the stress, there was also determination."</i>		

2. Demanding Nature of Documentation and Standards	2.1 Extensive Documentation Requirements	<p><i>"The level of detail expected in presenting evidence of performance, training, and accomplishments was more comprehensive than I initially anticipated."</i></p> <p><i>"Preparing and organizing numerous documents required time, effort, and careful attention to detail."</i></p> <p><i>"The system expects teachers to independently gather, organize, and submit all necessary documentation."</i></p>
	2.2 Competency-Based and Structured Evaluation	<p><i>"Unlike traditional promotion systems that often rely heavily on tenure, ECPS emphasizes merit, competencies, and professional growth."</i></p> <p><i>"The fact that advancement is linked to clearly defined competencies and measurable outputs made the system more systematic."</i></p>

Table 1. Teachers' Experiences with the Expanded Career Progression System

Teachers' engagement with the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) initially triggers emotional strain such as overwhelm, anxiety, and uncertainty due to heavy cognitive and administrative demands. This aligns with the Job Demands-Resources model (AB & Eva, 2017) and local findings on career stagnation (Longcob et al., 2022; Precellas & Bauyot, 2025). However, this is later balanced by motivation, excitement, and determination, as ECPS is perceived as a transparent, merit-based pathway that supports professional growth and retention (Fernet et al., 2016; Cahilog et al., 2023).

The system's documentation requirements are extensive and labor-intensive, reflecting accountability reforms under the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers, but often resulting in "paperwork performativity" where documentation takes precedence over actual teaching practice (Maloloy-on & Arnado, 2023). This burden is further intensified by existing ancillary tasks in schools (Albert et al., 2023; Oblina et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, teachers perceive ECPS as more structured, competency-based, and fairer than traditional tenure-based systems, aligning promotion with demonstrated competencies and professional development. The findings indicate a pattern of initial disruption followed by adaptive engagement, where stress is driven more by procedural demands than by the merit-based evaluation itself.

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Excerpts
1. Career Advancement and Financial Security	1.1 Promotion and Salary Increase	<p><i>"Career progression naturally brings opportunities for salary increase and greater job security."</i></p> <p><i>"Promotion represents growth, recognition, and acknowledgment of the dedication I have invested in my profession."</i></p> <p><i>"Second, the higher salary that comes with advancement is important for financial stability."</i></p>
	1.2 Recognition and Professional Acknowledgment	<p><i>"Recognition validates my hard work and dedication."</i></p> <p><i>"Recognition inspires me to do better."</i></p> <p><i>"Recognition reinforces my sense of purpose."</i></p>
2. Commitment to Professional Growth and Leadership	2.1 Continuous Improvement and Competence Development	<p><i>"The system encourages teachers to update their competencies, participate in trainings, and pursue further studies."</i></p> <p><i>"Professional growth ensures that I remain competitive and effective in the classroom."</i></p> <p><i>"Skill development is central to ECPS."</i></p>
	2.2 Leadership Aspirations and Expanded Influence	<p><i>"Career advancement motivates me because it opens doors to leadership opportunities and greater responsibility."</i></p>

“Advancing in rank could allow me to mentor colleagues, contribute to school improvement initiatives, and take on leadership responsibilities.”
“As teachers advance, they may mentor others or take part in decision-making processes.”

Table 2. Teachers' Motivation Toward the Expanded Career Progression System

Teachers interpret the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) as a pathway to career advancement primarily linked to financial security, job stability, and professional growth. Promotion and salary increase serve as strong extrinsic motivators, especially in the context of ongoing financial challenges despite reforms such as the Salary Standardization Law (Albert et al., 2023; Casingal & Ancho, 2022). Advancement is also viewed as validation of professional effort, reinforcing motivation and morale. Recognition emerges as a key intrinsic motivator, with teachers valuing acknowledgment as it affirms their professional identity and purpose. Literature supports that recognition enhances morale, commitment, and long-term engagement in professional development (Şahin & White, 2015; Rizvi, 2023).

Teachers also demonstrate strong commitment to continuous professional growth through trainings, graduate studies, and skill development, aligning with the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers and its career stages framework (Jorilla & Bual, 2021; Marcelo, 2025). Additionally, ECPS is perceived as a pathway to leadership, enabling teachers to take on mentoring roles and participate in decision-making processes, consistent with research on teacher leadership and distributed leadership models.

The findings indicate that ECPS functions as a multidimensional system where financial incentives, recognition, professional growth, and leadership aspirations interact. Teachers view advancement not merely as economic gain but as holistic professional development, strengthening their identity when the system is perceived as fair and transparent.

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Excerpts
1. Documentation and Time Constraints	1.1 Heavy Documentation Demands	<i>“The most difficult challenge is gathering and organizing supporting documents while meeting regular teaching deadlines.”</i>
		<i>“Documentation preparation requires careful organization, retrieval of records, and verification of certificates.”</i> <i>“One of the biggest struggles was retrieving documents from the past three years.”</i>
	1.2 Time Pressure and Workload Overload	<i>“Time constraints are a major concern.”</i> <i>“Time management is a constant challenge.”</i> <i>“Time pressure was very real.”</i>
		2. Unclear Guidelines and Evaluation Concerns
<i>“Some guidelines feel unclear, which makes it difficult to determine whether I am fully prepared or aligned with expectations.”</i> <i>“While general guidelines were available, they did not always specify the depth or format expected.”</i> <i>“One of the biggest challenges I encountered was not having a clear understanding of what specific documents should be included as evidence.”</i>		
	2.2 Emotional and Evaluation Anxiety	<i>“There is a lingering concern that factors beyond performance... might influence evaluation results.”</i> <i>“The long waiting time for checking portfolios also made the process emotionally exhausting.”</i>

Table 3. Challenges Encountered in Meeting ECPS Requirements

Teachers identify documentation as the most demanding aspect of the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS), as it requires extensive organization, verification, and alignment of records, often competing with instructional responsibilities.

This reflects the labor-intensive nature of the Results-based Performance Management System, where evidence collection can overshadow actual teaching practice (Dizon et al., 2018; Marcelo, 2025; Cahilog et al., 2023). Time pressure and workload overload further intensify these challenges, as ECPS requirements are added to already saturated teaching responsibilities, including non-teaching ancillary tasks (Tolibas & Lydia, 2022). This results in chronic strain and difficulty balancing instructional duties with compliance demands.

Unclear guidelines and ambiguity in evaluation criteria contribute to confusion and reduced confidence among teachers. Inconsistent interpretations and lack of standardized benchmarks create role ambiguity, which is linked to increased stress and lower professional self-efficacy (Dizon et al., 2018; Macovei et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers experience emotional and evaluation-related anxiety, particularly during observations and prolonged waiting periods for results. These processes are often perceived as high-stakes and lacking transparency, which heightens stress and concerns about fairness (Torres et al., 2024; Dizon et al., 2018).

The findings indicate that ECPS challenges stem from heavy procedural demands, time constraints, and ambiguity in implementation, which collectively impact teachers' confidence, well-being, and engagement with the system.

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Excerpts
1. Structured Career and Specialization Pathways	1.1 Clear Career Direction	<i>"I see ECPS as a structured pathway for career advancement."</i> <i>"If implemented effectively, ECPS has strong potential to open doors for structured career advancement."</i>
	1.2 Specialization Opportunities	<i>"Teachers can choose to remain in classroom-focused tracks or pursue administrative growth."</i> <i>"Specialization in certain subject areas or programs can enhance professional identity and contribution."</i>
2. Leadership and Skill Enhancement	2.1 Leadership Roles	<i>"Advancing in rank may allow me to mentor younger teachers or take on additional responsibilities within the school."</i> <i>"It opens doors to roles such as mentors, coordinators, or instructional leaders."</i>
	2.2 Skill and Instructional Development	<i>"Teachers are motivated to strengthen their instructional skills, explore innovative teaching methods, and engage in educational research."</i> <i>"Teachers are encouraged to improve instructional strategies, classroom management, assessment methods, and research skills."</i>

Table 4. Perceived Opportunities for Professional Growth

Teachers perceive the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) as providing a clear and structured career direction, offering predictable pathways for advancement and addressing previous issues of unclear progression systems in education (Magulod et al., 2020). This clarity enables teachers to plan their professional growth more strategically. The system also promotes specialization, allowing teachers to pursue different career tracks aligned with their strengths, such as classroom teaching or administrative roles. This shift from a one-size-fits-all model supports subject expertise and aligns with outcomes-based education frameworks (Magulod et al., 2020).

Additionally, ECPS fosters leadership opportunities by enabling teachers to take on mentoring, coordination, and collaborative roles, consistent with distributed leadership models that enhance school improvement and instructional quality. Teachers also associate ECPS with continuous skill and instructional development, encouraging innovation, research, and improved teaching practices. However, literature notes that these benefits may be constrained by workload and burnout, highlighting the need for responsive and supportive professional development systems (Fuentes, 2025; Fernando & Besa, 2025).

The findings indicate that ECPS supports structured career growth, specialization, leadership development, and continuous improvement, positioning it as a comprehensive framework for professional advancement when effectively supported and equitably implemented.

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Excerpts
1. Organization and Time Management Strategies	1.1 Systematic Documentation	<p><i>"I set personal deadlines ahead of official submission dates to avoid last-minute stress."</i></p> <p><i>"I cope by maintaining organized records throughout the year rather than waiting for deadlines."</i></p> <p><i>"I created digital folders categorized by competencies to ensure easier retrieval of documents."</i></p>
	1.2 Task Prioritization and Planning	<p><i>"Breaking tasks into smaller steps prevents me from feeling too overwhelmed."</i></p> <p><i>"I learned to allocate specific time slots for documentation and avoid procrastination."</i></p>
2. Seeking Support and Growth Mindset	2.1 Collegial and Leadership Support	<p><i>"Colleagues often share templates, advice, and insights about documentation preparation."</i></p> <p><i>"Their guidance helped clarify expectations and reduced confusion."</i></p>
	2.2 Maintaining Positive and Growth-Oriented Perspective	<p><i>"Keeping a growth mindset helps me see challenges as stepping stones rather than obstacles."</i></p> <p><i>"Instead of focusing solely on potential negative outcomes, I remind myself of the opportunities ECPS can offer."</i></p>

Table 5. Coping Strategies and Adaptive Practices

Teachers cope with the demands of the Expanded Career Progression System (ECPS) through systematic documentation and proactive time management. Maintaining organized records, setting personal deadlines, and using digital storage systems help reduce stress and align with the evidentiary demands of performance-based systems (Marcelo, 2025). Task prioritization and structured planning further enable teachers to manage workload, although broader workload issues remain a concern (Algar et al., 2025).

Collegial and leadership support serve as critical coping mechanisms, with teachers relying on peer collaboration, shared resources, and guidance to navigate complex requirements. Strong support systems enhance clarity, reduce anxiety, and promote professional learning (Pocaaan & Pocaaan, 2023). Teachers also adopt a growth-oriented mindset, reframing challenges as opportunities for professional development and sustaining motivation through a sense of purpose and commitment to lifelong learning (Falcon et al., 2025).

The findings show that teachers actively employ organizational, social, and cognitive strategies to manage ECPS demands, but sustained engagement requires institutional support to complement individual coping efforts.

Conclusion and Implications

The study concluded that teachers' experiences with the Expanded Career Progression System of the Department of Education were characterized by a dynamic interplay of motivation, challenges, and opportunities, where aspirations for professional growth, recognition, and career advancement were often tempered by documentation demands, time constraints, and procedural uncertainties. While ECPS presented a structured and merit-based pathway that enhanced professional identity and leadership opportunities, its effectiveness depended on the availability of institutional support systems that could mitigate challenges and enable teachers to fully realize its intended benefits.

The findings imply that successful implementation of ECPS requires a shift from purely compliance-driven processes toward a more supportive, capacity-building approach. Educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize clear guidelines, streamlined documentation systems, equitable access to professional development, and sustained mentoring structures to reduce workload burden and ambiguity. Additionally, embedding organizational support mechanisms such as digital portfolios, protected preparation time, and transparent evaluation processes can enhance teacher confidence, engagement, and trust in the system. Without these systemic adjustments, the intended goals of ECPS in promoting professional growth, retention, and instructional quality may not be fully achieved.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are included in this article.