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EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL HEADS IN DECLINING RETENTION RATE OF STUDENTS IN (DEPED) DEPARTMENT EDUCATION: REASONS IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative-phenomenological study explores the factors contributing to the declining retention rates of students in public elementary and secondary schools in Pantukan, Davao De Oro, as perceived by school heads. Through in-depth interviews and virtual focus group discussions with 14 school principals, the study identifies five primary reasons for the decline: lack of resources, mental health struggles, family issues, academic challenges, and poor school learning environments. The study also highlights four key themes from school heads' experiences: strengthening stakeholder support, cultivating community engagement, developing retention initiatives, and addressing teacher stress. Coping mechanisms, such as fostering leadership, applying collaborative strategies, and implementing targeted programs, were also identified.

The findings reveal that improving retention rates requires a comprehensive approach that includes better resource allocation, mental health support, and family involvement. School heads also emphasized the importance of teacher support, emotional resilience, and community collaboration in tackling retention challenges. The study's insights offer valuable guidance for educational leaders, teachers, parents, and policymakers in addressing the underlying causes of declining student retention.

KEYWORDS: *Student retention, school leadership, mental health, community engagement, educational resources.*

INTRODUCTION

The retention rate of students in Pantukan, as indicated by the Learner Information System (LIS), is relatively low, highlighting a significant challenge within the education system. School heads and teachers are actively seeking to identify the root causes of student dropout, with distance and economic concerns being the most cited factors. However, these issues may only represent a portion of the diverse reasons behind declining retention rates.

Research from various countries reveals different predictors of student dropout. In Malaysia, factors such as gender, academic achievement, and household income were found to significantly influence dropout rates (Shafiq et al., 2022). In Cambodia, a lack of supportive relationships, academic difficulties, and family background were identified as major causes of student withdrawal (Hu & Chan, 2021). Similarly, a study in Thailand highlighted various factors affecting retention, including academic support, financial aid, and personal circumstances (Dhin-Thai, 2020). In the Philippines, a study at STI Gensan Senior High School identified academic performance, financial status, and institutional commitment as key influences on student retention (Liansing, 2020).

In the Division of Davao De Oro, the decline in student retention is evident, prompting teachers to conduct home visits to locate students who did not enroll for the current school year. The decline is reflected in the number of students promoted to the next grade level.

Previous research, such as studies by Burke (2019) and Davis et al. (2019), emphasizes the importance of student engagement, belonging, and academic performance in predicting retention rates in higher education. However, these studies primarily employed quantitative methods and did not explore the perspectives of school principals regarding declining retention rates, particularly in the context of basic education in the Philippines.

Given the alarming decline in student retention rates in Pantukan, this study is timely and relevant. School principals play a crucial role in implementing solutions to address this issue. Understanding and addressing the factors contributing to declining retention is essential for ensuring equity and access to education, ultimately fostering an environment that promotes student achievement and persistence.

The retention rate, or the percentage of students who remain enrolled in their intended year level to continue and complete

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their education until graduation is relatively low in reference to data of the number of students promoted from their previous year level in the (LIS) Learner Information System of the school districts of Pantukan. This is only one of the difficulties that the education system is dealing with right now. Currently, school heads and teachers use a range of approaches to identify the root cause of why students decide not to continue schooling. In one look this problem can be traced back to a variety of causes, the most notable are distance and economic concerns. However, given that students come from a variety of backgrounds, the two reasons cited may only be the most typical among the many causes of decreased retention rate.

In Malaysia gender, academic achievement, and household income were discovered as predictors of school dropout utilizing a school administrative database containing data on over 100,000 pupils. The calculated model successfully predicted 20.83% of school dropouts. This is significantly higher than the sample mean for school dropouts (5%) (Shafiq et al., 2022). Likewise, in Cambodia, (Hu & Chan, 2021) examined the concept of student retention, which most likely revolve around the techniques and factors influencing student persistence and achievement in education. Several major causes of student withdrawal, included absence of sufficient contact with others, lack of supportive on-campus relationships, academic difficulties, family background, the inability of the people to organize and prioritize their goals for education and occupation, the failure to associate in academic and social domains. Meanwhile, in Thailand, people's willingness to continue their secondary education is dwindling. Reasons for student declining retention in education include academic support, financial aid, institutional support, student engagement, personal factors, instructional quality, career services, technology, diversity and inclusion, and early intervention (Dhin-Thai, 2020).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, a study conducted at STI Gensan Senior High School found out that three factors influence student retention. First, academic performance, students' academic success influences their decision to continue their education. High academic achievement has a positive effect on student retention. Second, Financial Status, financial constraints are a key barrier to student retention. The findings suggest that a lack of financial resources has forced students to stop their education. Finally, Institutional Commitment, which includes support services, resources, and the entire atmosphere supplied by the educational institution, is critical for student retention (Liansing, 2020).

In my own experience in the Division of Davao De Oro, the problem with the decline of student retention evidently exists. Back in the beginning of the school year last October 2023 teachers conducted home visits to look for the students who did not enroll to continue their education. The basis of the claimed decline in student retention was traced back from the number of students promoted from their previous grade levels to next.

There is a plethora of research conducted regarding student retention such as the study of Burke (2019) student retention rate is of great importance to higher education, but it is also complex and difficult to predict. It is evident that student engagement contributes greatly to student retention and boost commitment to the institution. Moreover, Davis et al. (2019) also conducted a similar study which emphasized that in higher education the student's belonging and their academic performance are both strong predictors of retention. Both studies emphasize the significance of academic assistance, financial aid, institutional support, and student engagement in increasing student retention rates in higher education institutions and identifying the factors that influence student persistence and achievement. However, both studies are conducted in quantitative manner and neither of the studies addresses and discussed the perspectives and experiences of school principals on declining student retention rates and were also not situated in the premise of basic education in the Philippines.

The conduct of this study is timely and relevant since the decline in student retention rate is alarming in reference to data of the number of students promoted from their previous year level in the (LIS) Learner Information System of the school districts of Pantukan, and school principals are the primary persons to launch solutions, approaches, and techniques to combat the issue in their respective institutions. Also, it is urgent to study the declining retention of students to ensure equity and access to education. By recognizing and resolving the issues that contribute to declining student retention, educational institutions may foster an environment that promotes student achievement and persistence, thereby offering equal chances to all students. Generally, since the results of the study will shed light on insightful discussions featuring the perspectives of school principals based on their experiences, it will be a potential tool to solve the declining retention rate and will help increase the number of students who continue their education from the previous grade level to next. It will also highlight relevant suggestions that can help the Department of Education, other school principals, teachers, parents, and even students not just to give more importance to education but to further understand the underlying causes of declining student retention rate.

The findings of this study will be disseminated through different community forums, seminars, symposiums, (LAC) Learning Action Cell Sessions, Symposia, and online platforms and repositories through the help of school-community stakeholders.

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to explore and understand the perspectives, experiences, and insights of public elementary and secondary school heads regarding the declining student retention rate in Pantukan, Davao De Oro.

At this stage in the research, retention rate is defined as the number of students who progress or enroll in the next grade level

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in contrast to the number of students promoted from the previous grade level.

Theoretical Study

This study is based principally on three theories: Bean and Eaton's (2001) Psychological Model of Student Retention, Goodenow's (1993) Sense of Belonging Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's (1991) Bio-ecological Systems Theory. Each theory is comprehensively explained below.

This study is anchored on Bean and Eaton's (2001) The Psychological Model of Student Retention proposes that a student's decision to stay at an institution is determined by their views toward it, which are shaped by their experiences there. Furthermore, the idea emphasized the utilization of first-year student programming, such as orientation seminars and mentorship programs, to emphasize the necessity of aiding students from the start of their academic journey. (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019) explains how psychological processes are used in successful retention programs including learning communities, freshmen interest groups, tutoring, and orientation.

In this study, the theory is linked to how students evaluate their education. It is critical that students think positively about education and how it can assist them to ensure a brighter future. Psychological Model of Student Retention offers insights into the underlying cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that impact students' decisions to continue or discontinue their educational path, which makes it closely tied to student retention. This is also related to the school heads' initiative to provide orientation for students in the early years of school to provide transparency about school culture so that students are fully informed of the experiences that they can receive during their studies. Moreso, this study can be tied to the significance of mentoring programs as a kind of student assistance. The presence and direction of a qualified adult will inculcate in the student the desire to continue their study, regardless of the difficulties.

Furthermore, the Sense of Belonging Theory, put forth by Goodenow (1993), is also adapted in this study. In this theory, a student's sense of belonging at school reflects how much they are valued, embraced, supported, and included by other members of the school community. Students who don't feel like they belong are more likely to experience feelings of loneliness, alienation, and social isolation, which are frequently the causes of student attrition. Students who feel like they belong to their academic community are more motivated to learn and enjoy their studies, which can influence their academic performance and lower their chance of considering dropping out of school early, both of which improve student retention (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021)

In this study, this is related to the programs, clubs, organizations, and activities that are initiated by school principals and teachers to ensure that each student's diverse abilities are catered for and given importance within the school environment. This also relates to how child-friendly school rules and regulations that promote belongingness rather than instill fear and cause isolation. By creating a safe space student can embark into study groups, work together on projects, and ask for help from their peers which in turn give a positive feeling and make them feel they belong, in turn it will increase the probability of them staying and continuing their schooling. Moreso, this theory also assists teachers to further the extent of effort that they put in creating novel approaches and techniques to give equal opportunities to students inside the classroom in such a way that they feel respected and included.

Lastly, this study is also seen through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Bio-ecological Systems Theory, which argues for the significance in classroom development of PPCT (Process, Person, Context, and Time). Students' proximal and distal interactions with the ecological systems of their school are part of the process. The individual considers students' active participation in directing their own learning. The ecological systems of the school are part of the context. Events and the students' chronological ages are included in the time (Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

In this study, the dynamic interplay that takes place between students and their surroundings, including the educational opportunities, student support services, and academic involvement that the institution offers directly relates to the "Process" in Bronfenbrenner Bio-ecological Systems Theory. Meanwhile, "Person" entails everyone's involvement as the primary agent in the macro decision of the learners to stay in school. These individuals such as the school heads, teachers, guidance counselor, people from school clubs and organizations are responsible in comprehending the unique traits of each student, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and personal objectives. The setting in which students learn is referred to as the context, and it includes both the actual school environment and the larger socio-cultural backdrop. Further, "Time" recognizes that student development is a process that takes place gradually and that elements that are both immediate and long-term have a significant impact on student retention. Therefore, student perception of school retention is heavily influenced by their school experiences, the people they interact with inside and even outside the school campus, and the level of support they receive in their social group.

This study will only focus on 14 public school principals, (7) from public elementary schools and (7) from public secondary schools of the South and North Districts of Pantukan, Division of Davao De Oro. Further, the study will be carried out from January to May 2023.

Given the limited number of participants, their experiences, perspectives, and insights do not represent those school principals coming from the other districts of the Divisions of Davao De Oro. Furthermore, the use of open-ended questions gives the participants more control over their responses that contributes to

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the reduced objectivity of the study. Hence, upon the conduct of the research the researcher will make certain of faithfulness and set aside personal biases about the study. The study is centered on the various perspectives of public elementary and secondary school principals who experienced declining retention rate of students at their individual schools.

The study is beneficial to the school heads as they can use the study's findings to create novel and unique academic support strategies to solve the declining retention rate of students. Also, with the data on student retention, school heads can allocate resources effectively. They can identify areas where additional help or resources are required to increase retention rates, resulting in better services for students.

The researcher believes that the study will benefit teachers because they are on the front lines of providing quality and sustainable education. This would allow them to better understand the underlying causes of the declining retention rate of students and to be more motivational and passionate about helping students appreciate the importance of education in building a secure future.

This study is also valuable to parents, as they are the ones who send their children to school. This will assist them to better understand and solve the various aspects that influence the child's decision to advance to the next grade level.

Also, the study will help the Department of Education officials, as the study presents them reasons behind the declining retention rates of students. This will encourage educational reforms and spark ideas about new types of educational subsidies directed to students. as the study presents them the reasons behind the declining retention rates of students. This will encourage educational reforms and spark ideas about new types of educational subsidies directed to students.

Lastly, this research will benefit future researchers as it may serve as a foundation for subsequent research and could be used as a source of literature for relevant studies by scholars in the future.

For easy and comprehensive understanding of the study, the following terms are defined both conceptually and operationally. The *Declining Retention Rate of Students* refers to the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen enrolling again at the same school for a second term or year of study (Gormley, 2019), and in this study, it is specifically defined as the percentage of students who finish their education and progress to the next grade level after completing the previous one. The study is organized into five chapters, with themes and concepts presented clearly for reader comprehension. Each chapter thoroughly discusses relevant content, making the study easy to follow.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, focusing on understanding the lived experiences, insights, and coping mechanisms of school heads regarding the declining retention rate of students. Qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring complex, multi-faceted phenomena and addressing the underlying reasons for observed trends (Busetto et al., 2020). It examines feelings, ideas, and experiences, often employing storytelling techniques to identify patterns that can generate testable hypotheses (Ibiloye et al., 2023).

Adopting a qualitative design was appropriate for this study as it aimed to collect non-numerical data to uncover the reasons behind the declining student retention rate. This design provided a framework for exploring participants' perceptions and experiences in depth.

Research Participants

This study included 14 participants, comprising seven elementary school principals and seven secondary school principals. The sample size adhered to Dodgson's (2023) recommendation of including 3–15 participants to achieve data saturation in qualitative research.

- Elementary School Principals: Participated in a focus group discussion (FGD).
- Secondary School Principals: Participated in in-depth interviews (IDI).

This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issue by drawing on diverse perspectives across different educational contexts.

Data Sources

The study relied on primary and secondary data sources:

1. Primary Data: Participants' responses collected through:
    - In-depth Interviews (IDI): Conducted with secondary school principals to gain detailed, discovery-oriented insights. Open-ended questions were employed to elicit in-depth responses.
    - Focus Group Discussions (FGD): Conducted with elementary school principals to explore shared experiences and collective perspectives.
2. Secondary Data: Supporting materials included books, journals, and articles, offering diverse viewpoints and analyses. These secondary sources provided context, interpretation, and additional depth to the study findings (USC Libraries, 2023).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection followed a structured qualitative methodology (Tenny et al., 2022):

1. Development of interview and FGD guides based on the research objectives.

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2. Conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with secondary school principals and virtual FGDs with elementary school principals.
3. Audio recordings of sessions were made with participants' consent for accurate transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data systematically, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020):

1. Transcripts were reviewed thoroughly to understand the data context.
2. Meaningful segments of data were identified and labeled with codes to capture recurring patterns.
3. Codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting key insights.
4. Themes were rechecked for consistency and unnecessary data were discarded.
5. Themes were refined, named, and defined to ensure clarity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study (Nafsi, 2023). This included:

- Securing approval from the Saint Mary's College of Tagum, Inc. Research Ethics Committee.
- Obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality.
- Maintaining transparency about the research purpose and procedures.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the outcomes of the data acquired from the participants' responses during the face-to-face in-depth interview and virtual focus group discussion. Results emerged in the form of core ideas, which were extensively evaluated using thematic analysis.

Table 1
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Reasons for the Declining Retention Rate of Students as Perceived by the Public Elementary and Secondary School Heads

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Lack of Resources	• having limited resources affecting student engagement • experiencing lack of modules due to pandemic • recognizing the importance of investing in resources for student well-being and academic achievement • having financial burden resulting failure in providing pupils' allowances. • experiencing financial burdens despite government support • dealing with parents' unstable employment
Mental Health Struggles of Students	• encountering emotional discouragement in today's generation whenever they are faced with small issues • losing interest in attending school for thinking that school is boring • having schoolyard bullying as a factor in dropout rates • dealing with mental health issues like stress, anxiety or depression • experiencing lack of parental support
Family Issues at Home	• considering the effects of a broken family background • having family issues/problems for a supportive home • having problems for a supportive home • struggling with personal crises • facing new responsibilities due to teenage pregnancy
Academic Struggles of Students	• having issues on unpreparedness in school settings • managing academic workload and its effects on interest • coming across online gaming addiction
School learning Environment Conditions	• experiencing fear in dealing with teachers • facing facilities condition as a factor in student transfer • struggling with safety concerns and geographical barriers • addressing nighttime noise affecting students' rest and study time

The declining retention rate of students in public elementary and secondary schools is influenced by interconnected factors across five major themes: lack of resources, mental health struggles, family issues, academic challenges, and school learning environment conditions. Limited resources, including financial constraints and inadequate materials, hindered engagement, while

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mental health struggles, such as stress, anxiety, and bullying, further discouraged attendance. Family instability, including broken homes and teenage pregnancy, compounded these challenges by reducing emotional and financial support. Academic struggles, such as unpreparedness, workload stress, and online gaming addiction, detracted from students' focus and interest in education. Additionally, poor school facilities, safety concerns, geographical barriers, and external disturbances created an unsupportive learning environment. Addressing these multifaceted issues requires comprehensive interventions targeting resource allocation, mental health programs, family support systems, academic remediation, and school infrastructure improvements to foster a supportive environment that enhances student retention.

Table 2
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Public Elementary and Secondary School Heads

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Strengthening Stakeholder Support	• advising parents to convince their children to come back to school • acting as a communicator to explain needed assistance • overseeing resource allocation for retention initiatives • including declining retention rate in SLAC discussions • facing potential teacher reassignment or school closure
Cultivating Community Engagement	• encouraging parent engagement through regular meetings • engaging with local government to ask for proactive support and assistance • leveraging LGU support while having limited alumni contributions • informing the community to foster cooperation • seeking community advice for addressing retention issues • participating in home visitations strengthening school community programs
Developing Initiatives for Declining Retention	• seeking solutions and initiating actions for improvements • creating initiatives to boost students' engagement • offering guidance and counsel to parents and students • leading faculty development to improve teaching practice and enhance student involvement
Dealing with Teacher Stress and Reassignment	• dealing with teachers being stress because of pressure on coming up with retention intervention • having to experience the possibility of potential teacher transfer • having teachers pulled-out because of extreme decline in retention rate • facing possible reduced in manpower • dealing with teachers being moved out to other stations

The experiences of public elementary and secondary school heads in addressing the declining retention rate of student's highlight four key themes: strengthening stakeholder support, cultivating community engagement, developing initiatives, and managing teacher stress and reassignment. School heads emphasized the importance of advising parents, communicating the need for assistance, and integrating retention strategies into school-based learning action cell (SLAC) discussions. They actively engaged with local governments, parents, and communities through meetings, home visitations, and cooperative programs to foster support and collaboration. Additionally, they led initiatives to enhance student engagement, provided guidance to students and parents, and prioritized faculty development to improve teaching practices. However, school heads also faced significant challenges, including teacher stress from retention interventions and the potential reassignment or transfer of teachers due to declining enrollment. These experiences underscore the complex, multifaceted role of school leaders in tackling retention issues and the need for a collaborative, community-centered approach to support student success.

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Table 3
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanisms of Public Elementary and Secondary School Heads with the Challenges Encountered in the Declining Retention Rate of Students

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Fostering Good Leadership, Attitudes and Skills	• maintaining composure under stress to preserve relationship • enhancing communication skills to gain support • being quick to respond to emerging issues • addressing problems through systematic processes • maintaining focus and staying resilient under pressure • delegating tasks based on staff capabilities
Applying Collaborative Approaches	• organizing emergency meetings • implementing frequent lac sessions for continuous support • involving multiple stakeholders in decision making • maximizing support through bold engagement • facilitating comprehensive team meetings • consulting others for collaborative decision-making • consulting teachers to ensure agreement and minimize complaints • listening and seeking input before coming up with decisions
Implementing School Programs Initiatives and Development for Students, and Teachers	• implementing specialized programs to boost student retention rate and enrollment • having start-of-year programs and varied clubs • enhancing classroom engagement with visual aids • investing in ongoing teacher training and refresher courses • guiding teachers to improve learning and engagement • offering guidance and counsel to parents and students

The study revealed several coping mechanisms employed by public elementary and secondary school heads to address the challenges of declining student retention. Key strategies included fostering good leadership, where school heads maintained composure under stress, enhanced communication skills, and responded swiftly to emerging issues while delegating tasks based on staff capabilities. Collaborative approaches were also central, with school leaders organizing emergency meetings, facilitating regular lac sessions for continuous support, and involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making to ensure consensus and minimize complaints. Additionally, implementing school programs for both students and teachers played a critical role, including specialized programs to boost retention, start-of-year initiatives, and ongoing teacher training to improve classroom engagement. These approaches highlight the importance of resilience, teamwork, and strategic programming in effectively navigating the challenges of student retention.

Table 4
Insights of Public Elementary and Secondary School Heads in the Declining Retention Rate of Students that can be Shared with Others

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Appreciating the Importance of Teachers in Solving Retention Issues	• giving students a support from teachers to prevent drop-out • consulting before taking actions promote shared responsibility and cooperation • leveraging manpower through delegation and follow-up • delegating tasks to teaching staff for effecting management • empowering teachers to handle tasks independently • being sensitive with teachers' preparation
Valuing the importance of Having Emotional Resilience	• relaxing and not venting on teachers take things easily • staying calm and focus under pressure • being patient and not getting angry easily • maintaining composure and focusing on solutions • emphasizing the importance of effective communication

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Valuing Stakeholder Engagement Upon Facing Retention Issues	• engage with the community to tackle root-level problems • enhancing communication among stakeholders • maintaining transparency with parents and learners • opening communication channels with partners
Optimizing the Availability of Resources in Building Retention Initiatives	• encouraging research on interventions for students' retention • allocating funds for extracurricular activities • leveraging technology integration • develop interventions and strategies for student retention rates improvement

The insights shared by public elementary and secondary school heads reveal several key strategies for addressing the declining student retention rate. Acknowledging the importance of teachers, school leaders emphasize providing support to prevent dropouts, promoting shared responsibility, and empowering teachers through delegation and independence. They highlight the value of emotional resilience, suggesting that maintaining composure, patience, and effective communication under pressure is crucial for both staff and students. Engaging stakeholders, including the community, parents, and partners, is seen as essential for tackling the root causes of retention issues and ensuring transparency. Additionally, optimizing resource availability—through research on retention interventions, funding extracurricular activities, and integrating technology—is vital in creating effective retention strategies. These insights underscore the collaborative, resilient, and resource-focused approach needed to improve student retention in schools.

DISCUSSIONS

This chapter discusses the findings of the study on the declining retention rates of students in public elementary and secondary schools in Pantukan, Davao De Oro. It presents the reasons for this decline as perceived by school heads, their experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights that can be shared with others.

Reasons for Declining Retention Rates

School heads identified a key factor contributing to declining student retention rates: the lack of resources. Insufficient resources hinder students' learning experiences, often forcing them to make difficult choices, such as taking multiple jobs or quitting school. Research supports this, showing that perceptions of available resources positively influence students' well-being and academic performance (Goldan et al., 2021). Additionally, financial struggles, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, have further strained families, negatively impacting students' motivation and retention (Moneva et al., 2020).

The second theme is the mental health struggles of students. Many students today face mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, which can severely impact their educational decisions. Studies show that students experiencing mental health challenges are at a higher risk of dropping out (Zając et al., 2023). Early intervention and comprehensive support are crucial for improving student well-being and retention (Bowman et al., 2020).

The third theme revolves around family issues at home. Family dynamics, including financial difficulties and lack of support, significantly influence students' decisions to continue their education. Parental involvement is critical for student retention, as supportive families can help mitigate the challenges students face (Ezeufondu, 2022).

The fourth theme is academic struggles. Many students experience gaps in their knowledge and skills, leading to decreased motivation and retention. Addressing these academic difficulties requires a multifaceted approach, including support from teachers and peers (Sutzko, 2019).

Lastly, the learning environment conditions play a significant role in retention rates. A positive and supportive school environment fosters student engagement and success, while a negative atmosphere can lead to disengagement and higher dropout rates (Hampopwe, 2020).

Experiences of School Heads

School heads shared their experiences regarding the declining retention rates, identifying four major themes. The first is strengthening stakeholder support. School heads recognize the importance of collaborating with stakeholders, including parents and community members, to address retention issues effectively (Paliani et al., 2021).

The second theme is cultivating community engagement. By engaging various stakeholders, school heads can create a supportive environment that addresses students' specific needs and enhances their educational experience (Bryan et al., 2020).

The third theme involves developing initiatives for declining retention. School heads are implementing comprehensive strategies to address retention, focusing on academic support, emotional well-being, and fostering a sense of belonging among students (Schwartz, 2022).

The fourth theme is dealing with teacher stress and reassignment. Declining retention rates can lead to increased workloads and uncertainty for teachers, necessitating effective management strategies to support staff (Love, 2021).

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Coping Mechanisms of School Heads

In response to the challenges posed by declining retention rates, school heads employ several coping mechanisms. The first is fostering good leadership, attitudes, and skills. Effective leaders inspire and engage students and staff, creating a positive school culture (Villanueva et al., 2021).

The second mechanism is applying collaborative approaches. Collaborative strategies involving multiple stakeholders are essential for addressing the complex nature of student retention (Udeogalanya, 2020).

The third mechanism involves implementing programs, initiatives, and development for students, teachers, and parents. Well-designed programs support students' academic and emotional development, while professional development for teachers is crucial for effective instruction (Schwartz, 2022).

In conclusion, addressing the declining retention rates in schools requires a multifaceted approach that includes strong leadership, community engagement, and effective resource management. By understanding the various factors influencing retention and implementing targeted strategies, school heads can create a more supportive and inclusive educational environment that fosters student success.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that declining retention rates in schools are driven by multifaceted issues that require coordinated efforts from various stakeholders. It recommends strengthening leadership, enhancing resource availability, prioritizing mental health support, and engaging parents and communities in educational processes. Furthermore, schools should develop tailored academic and emotional support systems to address students' individual needs. For future research, it is recommended to explore the impact of specific interventions and strategies on retention rates in different educational contexts.

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