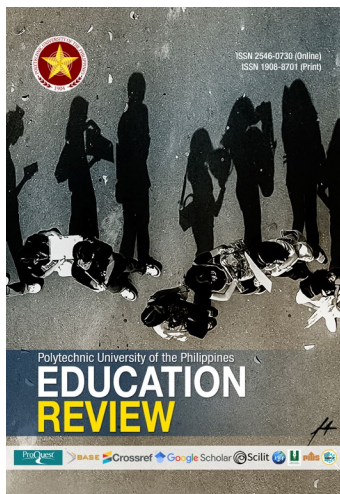




Tracing Student Attrition: Patterns and Determinants in a Private Catholic Senior High School

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Abstract

Global student attrition has become a more pressing issue since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Philippines continues to experience student attrition, especially among private schools, even with retention funding. This research studies the trends and reasons for student attrition from a private Catholic school in Batangas, Philippines, from the school years (SY) of 2019 to 2024. This research used a mixed-methods design. The researcher analyzed the exit interviews of 97 previously enrolled senior high school students and conducted key informant research of the school's guidance counselor, psychometrician, and class school masters, to see what common reasons were for student attrition. The results indicate that the school experienced student attrition that was variable by school year, with the most documented school years of student attrition being SY 2022-2023 (27 students) and SY 2023-2024 (26 students). The research shows that the ABM strand had the highest student attrition of 33 students, followed by HUMSS with 31 students, STEM with 25 students, and TVL with 8 students. The research categorized each student exit interview and reported that the top five reasons for student attrition were: (1) financial constraint (60%); (2) school transfer and relocation (45%); (3) transportation difficulties (35%); (4) academic pressure and strand (course) choice (30%); (5) personal and family concerns (25%). Although this private Catholic school provided financial aid, it had little to no impact on student exits. This research suggests that this school, and other similar private Catholic schools, develop a retention plan that addresses academic, financial, and personal student concerns and barriers. This research provides other similar private Catholic schools with the information, data, and evidence they need to improve the retention of school students.

Keywords: dropout rates, private Catholic schools, retention strategies, senior high school, student attrition

INTRODUCTION

Student attrition, characterized by withdrawal, dropout, or transfer prior to program completion, remains a major concern for education systems worldwide. Most public and private institutions lose considerable revenue from dropouts. Moreover, attrition negatively impacts the availability of a skilled workforce, which in turn has far-reaching effects on economic development (Tinto, 2006; World Bank, 2023). This problem is more pronounced in developing countries and was further aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic when many countries went into lockdown. As a result, schools were closed, students dropped out, and many teachers had to stop teaching (UNESCO, 2021). By March 2020, 89% of students had lost access to in-person teaching. Consequently, the disruption in educational access worsened retention and diminished students' motivation to continue attending classes. For many students in low-income countries, access to education was further constrained by inconsistent access to digital technology and diminished household income, especially following the loss of a parent's job. These challenges ultimately led to increased early school leaving among populations that were already the most disadvantaged (Asian Development Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

In the Philippines, student attrition in the basic education sector continues to be a persistent problem, weakening ongoing government remediation efforts. According to Department of Education (DepEd) estimates, only six (6) out of every ten (10) students who start Grade 1 reach Grade 10. Among those who do not complete Grade 10, lack of interest in education and financial constraints are the most commonly cited reasons (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2024; Suerte Felipe & Marcelo, 2023). Consistent with these findings, results from the latest Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) indicated that among students who do not complete Grade 10, those aged 12–15 and 16–17, comprising 41.9% and 28.3% of the sample, respectively, primarily cited a lack of intrinsic interest in education, with financial constraints emerging as the second most important reason (DepEd, 2023; PSA, 2024). While several interventions have been initiated, particularly the Senior High School Voucher Program and the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, which have provided economic benefits and supposedly improved access to higher levels of secondary and initial tertiary education, measures that have significantly improved retention have yet to be implemented (Rappler, 2025). Therefore, it can be inferred that monetary interventions should be supplemented by other policies.

Research into student dropout rates in the Philippines has mostly focused on the public education system or on trends observed at the national level. Consequently, a research gap exists for private institutions, specifically Catholic secondary schools in provincial areas. These schools, shaped by specific socio-economic and cultural characteristics, probably experience issues with student attrition that are different from

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those of public schools, which are larger and therefore have greater attrition concerns. Although existing research finds that tuition and financial concerns are the major barriers, non-financial issues also contribute to student exits. These include growing academic pressure, deteriorating mental health, unclear post-graduation pathways, and changing appraisals of the value of education, as found by Tinto (2012), and corroborated by Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho (2023). In response to this gap, this research aims to identify the different reasons for student exits in a Catholic private high school in Batangas and, in doing so, help build the framework for the discussion on educational persistence in this area.

In these circumstances, considerable instances of student dropout were noted in a private Catholic senior high school in Batangas from 2019 to 2024. This case is significant, especially in light of interventions such as the government's education vouchers, school policies waiving tuition for students who attended public junior high schools, and discounts for students who came from private junior high schools (Department of Education, 2023). However, these policies have not changed the dropout situation. This occurrence suggests that, despite vouchers alleviating some of the transactional hurdles, prospective dropouts still have to deal with various other hurdles, namely personal, academic, and socio-cultural factors (Bernardino et al., 2024).

To confront this under-explored research gap, the present investigation conducts a retrospective longitudinal examination of student withdrawals from SY 2019 to 2024 and provides a comprehensive and systematic account of the reasons for student dropout. To achieve this, the present study used an explanatory research approach. It considers persistent financial difficulties, inadequate education, barriers caused by adverse personal and family circumstances, and elements of the school's microenvironment, and amends the focus and scope of dropout studies from urbanized to rural and provincial contexts (Tinto, 2006; UNESCO, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Methodology and Design

This research used an explanatory mixed-method design combining both quantitative and qualitative research in analyzing student attrition in a private Catholic senior secondary school in Batangas from 2019 to 2024. For quantitative research, exit interview data stored in the guidance office archives were organized into records of student withdrawals by cohort and the frequency of cited reasons for attrition. Semi-structured key informant interviews with the guidance counselor, psychometrician, and class advisers were used to provide deeper insights into the psychosocial and contextual factors influencing student attrition. The integrated approach was in line with modern instructional research,

which recognizes that quantitative findings can be better understood through qualitative triangulation (Johnston & Jendoubi, 2024).

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of students who left the senior high school department between school years (SY) 2019 to 2024. Records from the guidance office served as the main data source to identify the number of student withdrawals and the reasons why students left (as documented on the exit interview forms). To provide additional context and validation purposes, key informants—including the guidance counselor, psychometrician, and class advisers—were selected because of their background in dealing with students and their professional observations on retention factors.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of institutional records represented by exit interview forms obtained from ninety-seven (97) former students through the guidance office. The second group of respondents consisted of key informants and included the guidance counselor, who conducted counseling and exit interviews; the psychometrician, who assessed students' mental and emotional well-being; and the class advisers, who monitored students' classroom engagement and academic performance prior to their exit.

Research Instruments

The researchers utilized two sources of data. First, the researchers conducted document analysis of exit interview forms to obtain a quantitative perspective on student attrition motivations. After the analysis, the researchers conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) to supplement the exit data. The respondents of the KIIs were the guidance counselor, the psychometrician, and the class advisers. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct the KIIs, allowing participants to explore multiple themes—including behavioral trends, psychological barriers, and academic difficulties related to student retention—which were only minimally captured in the exit surveys.

Data Gathering Procedures

The collection of data was done in a methodologically coherent sequence. First, approval from the school's administrators for access to the guidance records was sought. Then, exit interview forms from the academic years 2019 to 2024 were extracted. These records underwent iterative reviews to identify and analyze exit interview trends.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were then conducted with the guidance counselor, the psychometrician, and the class advisers. This process was carried out with informed consent and was audio-recorded and transcribed for later thematic analysis and synthesis

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, the exit interview forms were coded, and the annual attrition frequency counts were computed, in addition to identifying the most common reasons for student attrition described in the exit interview forms. The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic framework to classify the remaining financial, academic, personal, and institutional concerns. Recent literature has encouraged educational researchers to be more flexible and aggressive in their employment of mixed methods (Zou, Zhou, & Machtmes, 2024). Additionally, AI tools were employed to enhance the grammatical and syntactical presentation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutional and disciplinary frameworks of ethics. All key informants were given a full disclosure document, and their informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Institutional identifiers and interview transcripts were anonymized. All personal data were processed in a de-identified format. The database was encrypted and access was limited to authorized members of the research team with full agreement, and all digital transcripts were stored in password-protected files. Retention and use of transcripts were limited to the stated academic purpose of the study. Researchers assured participants that the feedback provided would contribute to strengthening the initiatives of the institution to improve the student retention rate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of student attrition data of a private Catholic senior high school located in Batangas includes data from School Years (SY) 2019 to 2024. This section attempts to analyze the existing data for patterns and trends of student attrition and for potential reasons for the student exit. The data is presented by strand and is supplemented by literature for reference.

Table 1*Student Attrition for SY 2019–2020*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	4
HUMSS	2
ABM	0
TVL	0
Total	6

During SY 2019–2020, data show that a total of six students exited the institution, with the STEM strand recording the highest attrition at four students. HUMSS had two student exits, while no attrition cases were reported in ABM and TVL. Since this period was still part of the pre-pandemic educational setting, the low attrition rate may reflect a relatively stable school environment with minimal external disruptions affecting student retention (DepEd, 2023).

Table 2*Student Attrition for SY 2020–2021*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	3
HUMSS	1
ABM	2
TVL	1
Total	7

In SY 2020–2021, a slight increase in student attrition was observed, with seven students leaving the institution. STEM continued to record the highest number of student exits at three. For the first time, ABM and TVL also recorded cases of student attrition. This increase was likely influenced by the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which created economic challenges and intensified difficulties associated with remote learning (World Bank, 2021). The first recorded attrition case in TVL may be attributed to challenges in technical-vocational education during the continued implementation of online and modular learning (Asian Development Bank, 2021)

Table 3*Student Attrition for SY 2021–2022*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	7
HUMSS	3
ABM	3
TVL	1
Total	14

A considerable increase in student attrition was noted in SY 2021–2022, with a total of 14 students leaving the institution. The STEM strand recorded the highest number of student exits at seven, followed by HUMSS and ABM with three students each. Challenges associated with the post-pandemic transition to face-to-face learning, together with financial pressures on families and the lingering effects of distance learning, may have influenced decisions to discontinue schooling (UNESCO, 2022; Gouédard et al., 2020).

Table 4*Student Attrition for SY 2022–2023*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	5
HUMSS	8
ABM	13
TVL	1
Total	27

For SY 2022-2023, ABM had an attrition rate of 13, while HUMSS had a rate of 8. This year had the highest rate of attrition with a total of 27. This rate may be connected to the post-pandemic recovery. In the context of the continual recovery of the post-pandemic economy, families are still facing potential financial difficulties and have decreasing confidence in finding jobs with a potential in the business-related areas (Bernardino et al., 2024).

Table 5*Student Attrition for SY 2023–2024*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	5
HUMSS	13
ABM	6
TVL	2
Total	26

Student attrition continued to be a problem in SY 2023-2024 with 26 students leaving. HUMSS had the highest number of exit (13). ABM had lower attrition than in the previous year while TVL increased, demonstrating the requirement for additional support for the vocational training programs (Asian Development Bank, 2023).

Table 6*Student Attrition for SY 2024–2025*

Strand	Number of Dropouts
STEM	1
HUMSS	4
ABM	9
TVL	3
Total	17

During School Year 2024-2025, total attrition fell, with only 17 students leaving. STEM had just one student leaving. This reflects greater engagement in STEM programs. Nearly all attrition was from ABM, with 9 students leaving, while TVL had its highest recorded attrition of 3 students. This shows a clear gap in meeting the needs of industry with our programs (DepEd, 2023).

Table 7*Summary of Student Attrition from SY 2019–2020 to SY 2024–2025*

SY	STEM	HUMSS	ABM	TVL	Total Dropouts
2019–2020	4	2	0	0	6
2020–2021	3	1	2	1	7
2021–2022	7	3	3	1	14
2022–2023	5	8	13	1	27
2023–2024	5	13	6	2	26
2024–2025	1	4	9	3	17
TOTAL	25	31	33	8	97

From SY 2019 – 2020 to SY 2022 – 2023, student attrition increased annually, peaking at 27 students. This correlates with challenges in education that were seen across the country, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, and the associated disruptive learning, increasing financial difficulties and increasing student disengagement (UNESCO, 2021). The financial crisis, the disruption of class and remote learning, and the increase in ‘personal challenges’ and mental health issues, which are a focus of decaying post-pandemic study of education (DepEd, 2023), can be the causes of increasing student attrition. Fortunately, decline of dropout rates from SY 2023 – 2024 and SY 2024 – 2025 shows improving attitude toward persistence of students. The positive impacts of retention strategies the school implemented, the economy, and learning (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023).

Examining the attrition rates across academic strands, STEM reported the highest dropout rate during SY 2021–2022, with 7 students. STEM dropout issues may be explained by the high demands of the strand and the challenges of remote learning (Asian Development Bank, 2023). A notable change occurred in SY 2024–2025 when only 1 student left the STEM strand. This change may be the direct result of positive changes in the school system, such as increased teaching and learning support, mentoring, and curriculum changes. SY 2023–2024 also saw an increase in student dropouts from the HUMSS strand, which may be the result of a lack of direction and possible career uncertainty in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho, 2023). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the ABM strand showed a post-pandemic increase in student dropouts for SY 2022–2023 (13 students). This may be the result of decreased interest in post-pandemic business studies and fewer flexible course options (Bernardino et al., 2024). The TVL strand has shown a steady decline in student dropouts; however, the 2024–2025 school year observed an increase. This may be the result of a lack of interest in vocational education or a lack of industry connections to enable work placements (Asian Development Bank, 2023).

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ATTRITION TRENDS IN THE SHS DEPARTMENT

TVL Strand

Student feedback identified four primary reasons for withdrawal from the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) strand: (1) *Financial Constraints*, (2) *Transportation Challenges*, (3) *Academic Difficulties*, and (4) *Change of Residency*. Overall, the reasons for withdrawal indicate that there are operational and socio-economic challenges that hinder retention in the program.

1. Financial Constraints

Many respondents identified financial management as a cause for withdrawal, highlighted in comments such as “*maraming bayarin sa school*” (many school expenses) and “*financial problem*.” Even without tuition, the cumulative educational burden—including payment of other fees, transportation costs, and stipends—proves heavy for many households. This type of economic burden is one of the main reasons students attritions from school, especially in private settings where families bear the bulk of outlays (DepEd, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). According to the Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), financial problems are the second leading reasons for youth dropouts in the Philippines (PSA, 2024). Additionally, the financial crisis caused by the pandemic further reduced an already inadequate budget for school, making it even more difficult for households to send their children to school (Asian Development Bank, 2023; Bernardino et al., 2024).

2. Transportation Challenges

The currently most common barrier driving student drop-out is the burden of commuting. During focus group discussions, students often cited “*conflict for transportation*.” Others who said “*nahihirapan sa biyahe at malayo sa school*” (having difficulty with the commute and the school is far) stressing the relentless strain of long trips. There are few direct transit routes for students from mountain or shore barangays, collecting and compounding hours, costs, and the slim chance of getting a seat. For students, the situation is better reflected in research, which says that those who endure costly daily transfers that take significant time are much more likely to abandon the school to find one that is closer (Rellon, et al., 2024). Distance is combined with the unreliability of transportation, which the Department of Education (2023) describes as a structural barrier of significant concern for island and mountain schools.

3. Academic Difficulties

Some students said “*nahihirapan sa school works*” (having difficulty with school work) when asked how they thought of school. This answer suggests that many students cannot cope with the demands of the TVL strand, which advanced significantly beyond the students’ educational preparation, especially those whose prior schooling focused on the basic preparatory grades. The available data suggest that those who encounter such challenges and are provided no academic supports become disengaged, which raises the risk of dropping out (PSA, 2024). The combination of strenuous work and a lack of curricular and personal guidance is estimated to have the greatest impact on school dropout in the existing research (Tinto, 2006; Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho, 2023).

4. Change in Residency

One student said that being “*narelocate*” (displaced due to government resettlement) was the sudden reason for dropping out because “*lilipat na po kami ng barangay*” (we are moving to another barangay). Usually caused by new jobs or financial pressures, family relocations interrupt school. Literature supports this: the economic situations leading to relocations are connected to how people drop out of schools (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). The Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS, 2024) offers a more nuanced approach. The Institute describes mobility and migration as “twin sandbars” causing families to remain elusive, whether on the islands or the urban center.

STEM Strand

Five repetitive themes based on students’ qualitative feedback identify primary reasons that respondents in this study withdrew from the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) strand: (1) *Transportation and Distance Challenges*, (2) *Transfer and Relocation*, (3) *Academic Pressure*, (4) *Safety and Security*, and (5) *Financial and Family Pressure*. These themes combined show the barriers that the respondents of this study face when they are expected to withdraw from the STEM strand.

1. Transportation and Distance Challenges

Withdrawal from the STEM strand was often due to commuting challenges. Examples of commuting challenges that were mentioned included: “*nahihirapan sa biyahe*” (difficulties during travel), “*malayo po ang school sa bahay*” (school is far from home) and “*dahil po sa pamasahe mahal*” (fares are expensive). These indicate that there are challenges related to distance and costs that make it difficult to continue studying. Rellon, et al., (2024) have shown that problems that have to do with travel time and transportation costs negatively affect school attendance. Commuting problems that cause delays and pay

raises are a deterrent to students. The Asian Development Bank (2023) made a similar observation about commuting problems resulting in educational challenges that are caused by low to middle income families in Southeast Asia.

2. School Transfer and Relocation

From various parent comments, including one that stated, *“pinalipat po ng parents sa mas malapit na school”* (My parents transferred me to a school closer to my house), we see that parents transfer children to schools with a closer proximity to their homes. We also see children relocating to new schools to follow their peers, as highlighted by the comment *“limipat ang mga kaklase sa ibang school”* (My classmates transferred to another school). We also see comments that highlight the general feeling of being *“forced to transfer to a school that is closer to their house.”* It seems that there could also be physical and emotional safety factors when trying to balance self-supervision and money for transportation, thus transferring to a school that is closer to their house. There was a predominant pattern emerging where the accessibility factor was reinforced by findings from the Department of Education (2023) that highlighted school choices that the students made. We see evidence in the school choices made by the students that were influenced by the stress of transportation and the accessibility of the schools. The UNESCO (2023) Global Education Monitoring Report reveals that accessibility of schools is a major factor when students want to stay and complete their secondary education.

3. Academic Pressure

Participants identified tough curriculum expectations as a leading factor that drove them out of STEM. One respondent used the term *“stress pressure sa acads,”* (stress and pressure from academics) while two of his/her peers, who did not take the National Career Assessment Examination (NCAE), undermine their confidence with the strand. Many people argue that teaching styles and the level of discipline expected of students in STEM programs are among the most demanding. Further, recent studies show that prolonged academic stress leads to the depletion of academic resources, withdrawal from learning communities, and a range of other activities that can lead to a permanent exit. According to Tinto (2012), the level of sustained participation in higher education programs is directly related to the degree of intrinsic academic motivation and the level of perceived supportive services and interventions within the institution. In addition, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2024) noted that students enrolled in STEM programs that are extremely demanding are at a high risk of dropping out without support in the form of curriculum and extracurricular activities.

4. Safety and Security Concerns

One student shared a deeply distressing experience involving a kidnapping attempt by a van driver who also made inappropriate advances, *“may van po na sumusunod po sa akin nung ako po ay pauwi na.”* (There was a van following me when I was on my way home). The emotional aftermath has made it difficult for her to trust commuting, a fear becoming more common for the youth due to physical threats. Such occurrences abruptly shift institutionally managed perceptions of security, thereby affecting retention: students compelled to navigate a perceived hostile landscape assign higher exit priority to a familiar institution. The importance of maintaining a safe environment was recognized by UNESCO (2021). They stressed that learner attendance is stabilized by ensuring security in the environment. Complementarily, Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho (2023) state that the likelihood of withdrawal rises with the anticipation of violence. Further defining the breadth of the phenomenon, a different narrative described leaving upon inescapable peer harassment. This has been shown in recent reports from the Department of Education (2024) that state victimization among peers is one of the major factors of students leaving the Basic Education System early.

5. Financial and Family Issues

Five respondents gave withdrawal explanations linked to financial and family issues. *“Family problems”* and *“financial issues”* suggest that the inability to sustain tuition and other non-academic family burdens limit persistence. This conclusion is consistent with studies showing that the lack of financial resources is a major reason for leaving. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2023) found that 28.3% of those who withdrew completely from Senior High School cited financial difficulties. In addition to Census information, the World Bank (2024) stated that an increase in domestic economic instability, most notably unemployment of parents, considerably increases the tendency to stop schooling. In reference to this, during the pandemic, Bernardino et al., (2024) found that financial problems, along with the increased caregiving and work obligations of family members, increased the likelihood to withdraw from private schools in the Philippines.

ABM Strand

Analysis of the ABM students' private school withdrawal narratives revealed six broad categories. These were (1) *financial constraints*, (2) *school transfer and relocation*, (3) *academic and strand choice*, (4) *feeling of isolation and discomfort*, (5) *family issues*, and (6) *personal and other life circumstances*. Each of these categories encompassed a number of interrelated stressors that increased the likelihood of withdrawal from the ABM strand and provided focused areas from which to develop retention strategies.

1. Financial Constraints

There is a very large number of students that identified financial constraints as the main cause of leaving university. For example, responses included *“financial problem,”* *“wala pong pambayad ng graduation fee”* (no money to pay for graduation fee), and *“nag-failed po kasi nasira ang phone”* (failed because phone was broken). Economic pressure on students is not a new phenomenon. There is a vast body of literature that links economic pressure to increased dropout rate, and this is especially true for students enrolled in private universities because of the total cost of tuition and other university fees (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2024). Looking back, Bernardino et al., (2024) say that the disruptions to education because of the pandemic worsened the financial pressure of students because of the socioeconomic gaps. Regarding the recent pandemic, the frustration is not only about the cost of tuition; financial pressure caused students to be unable to afford the basic online learning tools: a laptop and reliable Internet access. Also, the lack of adequate money to pay transport costs to and from the university, which for some is a prerequisite to attending classes, has caused voluntary and involuntary dropout from the university (World Bank, 2024).

2. School Transfer and Relocation

Exit interviews showed that a large number of students transferred to other schools because of relocation, often referred to as *“change of residency”* or because of geographic considerations, articulated by the parents in the common saying *“mas malapit na school”* (closer school). Some students described relocation as a move that was decided on by the parents. The large number of school transfers demonstrated that both the students and parents place a significant level of importance on distance. Data released by the Department of Education (2023) supported these findings and indicated that travel distance and access to schools are the main contributing factors to retention rates. Lengthy commutes have been shown to cause chronic tiredness, increased transportation costs, and decreased interest in academic pursuits. The UNESCO (2023) report explains that school accessibility is an equity concern, especially in geographically large and low population regions where transportation systems are inadequate to meet the sustained travel needs of the population.

3. Academic and Strand Choice

Some students expressed their dissatisfaction with curricular requirements and said, *“nahihirapan sa school activity”* (struggling with schoolwork). In addition, they expressed that their strand choice was wrong by stating, *“mali po ang strand na napili ko”* (I chose the wrong strand). One student expressed that he preferred to use different teaching methods. Another student preferred to use a modular teaching approach. These

facts show that the lack of advisory support during the strand choosing process may have resulted in engagement issues with the school activities and, in some cases, withdrawal from the school. As Tinto (2012) states, engagement issues with school activities arise when a student's educational placement conflicts with the student's school goals. Supporting evidence was provided by Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho (2023), stating that enhancing career counseling in senior high schools reduces cases of strand choice misalignment and supports that counseling systems are important in keeping students from leaving school.

4. Feeling of Isolation and Discomfort

Some participants reported feeling isolated and discomfort at school with the phrase *"hindi komportable sa school"* signifying not comfortable at school. Some participants mentioned informal social networks were missing (*'personal choice, walang nakakasabay pumasok'* translates to *'personal choice, no one to go to school with'*). These comments show a lack of social integration and may lead to negative feelings and difficult behaviors and may affect retention. According to Tinto's (2006) model of integration, social and academic belonging are almost equally important to persistence. Peer support and encouragement are important, and a lack of these elements will result a higher risk of leaving the school (Tinto, 2006). With this framework in mind, schools should try to decrease the isolation felt by many participants. Schools should try to include student groups, peer-mentoring and co-curricular activities.

5. Family Issues

Some students saw family problems as the main reason for leaving school, indicating the role of the family in the decision to stop formal education. These problems include family conflict, economic challenges, and the absence of encouragement from parents. The literature acknowledges a persistent relationship between these problems and leaving school early (UNESCO, 2021). In the Philippines, the PSA (2024) identified family challenges as the most common reason for leaving school. Collectively, these challenges suggest that school retention strategies should go beyond school-centered curriculum policies and include family-centered policies with sustained and systematic interventions.

6. Individual and Other Life Circumstances

Some students had serious, and in some cases, pregnancy-related issues that were highly visible and the main reasons for leaving the education system. Other students cited reasons of a personal nature that were also of a highly invisible nature. The DepEd (2023) noted early pregnancy and a lack of school-related activities as the main reasons for leaving school during the senior high years. In this regard, school-related activities

and academic providers can introduce special teaching methods and modular-based teaching methods to reduce the gaps and negative influences of life events on education (Bernardino et al., 2024).

HUMSS Strand

In the analysis of qualitative narratives of respondents in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) strand, six major themes describe the most significant factors that caused early school leaving. They are as follows: (1) *Financial Difficulties*, (2) *School Transfer and Relocation*, (3) *Transportation Challenges*, (4) *Social and Emotional Issues*, (5) *Academic and Strand Choice*, and (6) *Personal and Family-Related Concerns*. Together, these themes express different reasons behind school attrition and define the areas targeted support is likely to reduce school attrition and enhance student retention.

1. Financial Problems

The most common reason for students leaving the HUMSS strand was economic problems, which was captured in many exit surveys in the phrase “*financial problems*”. One comment that shows the financial pressure of families is “*di na kayang papasukin sa private school*” (can no longer afford to send to a private school). In this case, the family was presented with a financial constraint to pay the school’s tuition and related school costs. Some students reported issues related to inadequate technology, such as ‘my cellphone is broken’. Without a functioning cellphone, the student has no way of participating in remote or blended learning. Private schools present families with additional technology issues. In addition to school tuition, families may have to pay fees for rental labs to undertake practical science lessons. UNESCO (2023) continues to identify financial instability as the primary reason for withdrawal in Southeast Asia. In addition, Bernardino et al., (2024) explain that the transport and airtime costs of attending school represent an indirect expense to the student, and economic attrition occurs when an externally funded aid program is delayed or deemed to meet the aid program’s obligations.

2. School Transfer and Relocation

There has been a spike in school transfers this term due to changes in location and proximity preferences. Parents, in their informal conversations, put it as “*a school closer to home*.” From my understanding, entire families made the decision to either transfer to a more affordable private school and take advantage of less expensive housing nearby, or to transfer to a school along a more convenient line of daily commuting. Relocation is a commonly accepted reason for transferring, and the 2023 Department of Education

situational report cites geographic access as the most important reason for families wishing to stay connected to a school. The relocation of households and long commuting distance to a school often leads to disconnection of families from the school long before there are negative effects on the child's academic performance. This is in line with the ideas of contemporary Tinto (2006), who suggests that, in order to promote student retention, schools should focus their analysis and remedial work on the domestic, economic, and spatial contexts beyond the school gate and the diploma.

3. Transportation Challenges

Many respondents voiced concerns regarding transportation. Responses indicated *“transportation problem”* and *“far from home”* which made students feel unsafe. Travel time caused problems with student health and increased fatigue. An increase in time and financial cost of travel erodes the incentive of students to attend school and contributes to a higher rate of students dropping out of school. UNESCO (2021) stated that transportation is a barrier to educational access. This is a problem in many rural areas of low- to middle-income countries. In the Philippines, Rellon, et al., (2024) showed that travel problems, persistent traffic jams, and class attendance have an inverse relationship. If schools and local governments collaborated, school shuttles, subsidized public transport, or transportation aids could be created to lessen the impact of transportation on school attendance.

4. Social and Emotional Issues

Describing the experiences of some respondents, qualitative descriptions have surfaced that address social isolation, bullying, and the challenges of working with peers. Annotated remarks such as *“other students making fun of me”* and *“kakaunti ang nakakasaama at hindi sanay ng walang kasama kumain”* (the few friends, not accustomed to eating without companions) describe the challenges to social integration. While some stated specific feelings of dissatisfaction, others, like the person that said *“I’m not happy and comfortable,”* describe a general dissatisfaction with feelings of unease in the school. This combines the relation to both emotional and physical distance from the school. According to Tinto's (2006) model, all academic results are bound by social results. Thus, the persistence to study is not the result of mental activities alone, but requires the development of social ties. In support of Tinto (2006), and Fernandez, Balijon, & Ancho, (2023) observed that an evident lack of social belonging and peer support, is likely to cause students to leave school. Further, those students that are most socially isolated have the least desire to continue studying.

5. Academic and Strand Choice

A number of repodents have expressed that they are encountering persistent difficulties within their selected academic strand (*“nahihirapan sa strand”*) (struggling with the academic strand), which has prompted some to contemplate an imminent shift of track (*“planning to change my strand”*). Concurrently, signs of declining inspiration are evident, as illustrated by statements indicating an aversion to remaining in school (*“ayaw na pumasok at mag-aral”*) (no longer wants to attend school or study). This shows that the strand-selection process for some students is either too early or does not consider the students and is the cause of the student’s frustration and school dropout. The study conducted by Tinto (2006) shows the empirical evidence and suggests that academic adversity strongly predicts academic persistence; however, a thoughtful placement of formal organizational structures (i.e., mentoring and counseling) produces the greatest level of protection. Supporting this is a recent study from the World Bank that shows that in well-designed secondary career counseling frameworks, users report lower levels of frustration and increased levels of commitment to secondary education.

6. Personal and Family-Related Concerns

Subjects ranging from informal interviews to surveys have confirmed that students have quit school for personal and family reasons. Some have said that they had to stay home to care for their grandparents (*“need ng grandparents ng kasama”*) (Grandparents need someone to stay with them). Others have said they transferred to another school after they were influenced by their friends. One student even said, *“nagbago po ang isip, sasama na sa kaibigan sa ibang school,”* (I changed my mind. I will accompany my friend to the alternative institution.) In other words, family responsibilities and the changing social networks have affected retention the most. The 2023 report of the Asian Development Bank said that sudden and unexpected economic situations will usually result in the adolescent members of the family providing care to family members in the household. This is especially true in the provincial areas. From an economic viewpoint, Bernardino et al., (2024) said that attrition is not the result of personal decisions, but of family and community decisions related to family and community care. To preemptively counter the range of attrition posed by personal and collective responsibilities, schools can provide concentrated counseling, develop structured participation of family members, and provide flexible learning pathways for family and community members.

Summary of Common Factors Affecting Student Attrition Across Strands

Thematic analysis of student responses in TVL, STEM, ABM, and HUMSS revealed that the following five common factors were the main reasons for student attrition:

1. Financial Constraints
2. School Transfer and Relocation
3. Transportation Challenges
4. Academic Pressure and Strand Choice
5. Personal and Family-Related Concerns

CONCLUSIONS

The study identified multiple shared factors causing student attrition across different academic strands. The most common reasons for student dropout were inadequate finances, transferring to another school due to relocation, difficulties with transportation, pressure due to academics and choice of strand, and personal and family issues. Although the intensity varied across strands, all of them reflected the socio-economic challenges and psychological barriers to student retention.

The most significant barrier was the student's direct financial challenges of paying school fees, paying for transportation and other school-related costs. There were also challenges due to multiple relocations and the need for students to transfer to school nearer to the new residence. Accessibility challenges due to high commuting costs and concerns for safety also contributed to student attrition, especially for students residing far from school. There were high demands for academic support, especially in the STEM and ABM strands. Psychosocial support and the resolution of bullying, personal isolation and family support were also the key issues affecting students' retention in school.

The findings highlighted the need to formulate an integrated, multi-factor and intersectoral response for student retention. Failure to intervene will mean that student dropout will be sustained with negative impact on the overall education and student success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address student attrition, an institution must utilize strategies that integrate the resources of the school with those of the students. First, better financial understanding of the students must be achieved. The school would benefit from informing students of staggered payment options, as well as other means of internal financial support. Furthermore, students dealing with financial hardships should be given the opportunity to approach administration with the potential they may be offered work-study opportunities.

Second, school support must be expanded. This can be achieved through improved career consultations and orientation sessions, as well as school-sponsored opportunities to select strands that reflect the highest potential for the students. This may be coupled with initiatives to provide a greater opportunity for remedial instruction or peer support for those students struggling with coursework.

Third, the school can offer additional measures that address emotional anxiety through social isolation, i.e. mental health support and adjustment peer support. It is equally important to foster positive community relationships and to engage the parents. This can be accomplished through strengthening the school and home communication with regularly scheduled parent/teacher conferences, supplemented with digital updates. The establishing community partnerships may provide additional resources, e.g. mentors for the students.

Lastly, it is important to design early intervention methods for students who are considered to be at-risk in order to enable positive changes in retention rates. Creating a rudimentary tracking system that flags those students who demonstrate initial signs of attrition (for example, excessive absenteeism and/or a decline in level of performance) will enable prompt countermeasures. Teachers must also be trained in the identification of students who show signs of academic irregularity and/or emotional distress and how to make appropriate referrals to the guidance office for support. By implementing these applicable school-based methods, the school system will be able to achieve a more supportive and positive climate for learning and for decreasing student attrition while increasing retention rates.

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