

# **UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ**

**Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades**

**“I am a teacher”: Vocation or consolation?**

**Doménica Cristina Mantilla Robalino**

**Educación PR**

Trabajo de fin de carrera presentado como requisito  
para la obtención del título de Licenciada en Ciencias de la Educación

Quito, 19 de diciembre de 2024

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## **HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN DE TRABAJO DE FIN DE CARRERA**

**“I am a teacher”: Vocation or consolation?**

**Doménica Cristina Mantilla Robalino**

**Nombre del profesor, Título académico**

**Tiago Bittencourt, Ph.D**

Quito, 19 de diciembre de 2024

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Nombres y apellidos: Doménica Cristina Mantilla Robalino

Código: 00217140

Cédula de identidad: 0925771545

Lugar y fecha: Quito, 19 de diciembre de 2024

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## RESUMEN

El abandono docente se ha estudiado principalmente desde factores individuales y estructurales. Este estudio cualitativo analiza cómo la identidad profesional de los docentes en sus primeros cinco años de carrera influye en sus decisiones de permanecer o abandonar la profesión. A través de entrevistas con nueve docentes de una universidad de élite en Ecuador, los hallazgos revelan que una identidad profesional sólida fomenta resiliencia y compromiso, pero también puede limitar sus aspiraciones profesionales. Comprender el abandono requiere explorar la formación de la identidad y sus efectos complejos.

**Palabras clave:** abandono docente, docentes principiantes, identidad profesional, resiliencia docente, retención docente

## ABSTRACT

Teacher attrition is often studied through individual and structural factors. This qualitative study explores early-career teachers' professional identity and its influence on their intentions to remain or leave the classroom. Through interviews with nine teachers from an elite university in Ecuador, findings reveal that a strong professional identity fosters resilience and commitment, yet can also constrain broader career aspirations, contributing to feelings of stagnation. Understanding attrition requires examining identity formation and addressing both its empowering and limiting effects.

**Key words:** teacher attrition, early-career teachers, professional identity, teacher resilience, teacher retention

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## INTRODUCCIÓN

Teacher attrition is a critical area of research due to increasing teacher turnover and shortages worldwide, a trend that started even before the pandemic. Thus, teacher retention has become key to maintain stability in the field. Researchers continue their attempts to understand the causes of attrition and suggesting possible buffers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Most of the existing corpus of research emphasizes the negative impact of teacher attrition on education, highlighting its damage to a wide range of issues, including student achievement and the prestige of schools and the profession (Schaefer, Long, Clandinin, 2012). Thus, attrition is a study-worthy issue because of its disruptiveness, and its study rarely extends beyond issues of retention and prevention of further turnover.

In general terms, teacher attrition is understood in the literature as teacher mobility, acknowledging the complexities that it entails (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012). However, it is commonly studied as teachers who decide to leave the profession entirely. Attrition can occur at any point in a teacher's trajectory, although it is most prevalent within the first five years. A significant number of early-career teachers (those with five or fewer years of classroom experience) consider leaving, which correlates with a higher likelihood of actual exit (Brandenburg, Larsen, Simpson, Sallis & Trần, 2024). Thus, in this study, attrition will be understood as early-career teachers' intentions to leave the profession permanently for reasons other than retirement.

The discussion around attrition is concerned with understanding its causes, which is a multifaceted and nuanced task. Literature on attrition reveals two main frameworks through which to understand the study of its causes (Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012). On one hand, teachers might leave due to individual factors, which encompass the teachers



themselves – their demography, background, resilience, burnout – and how these factors interact with their teaching practice. On the other hand, factors related to structural issues in education, such as compensation, workload, and insufficient training and resources have a strong impact in teachers' decisions to remain or leave the profession. These relate to the precarious working conditions in teaching and how they are perceived as embedded into it.

Literature on attrition has mostly focused on these straightforward explanations. Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin (2012) argue that this strand of the research tends to view early-career teacher attrition as a single occurrence, rather than an ongoing process, raising important questions regarding the temporal dimensions of attrition. In response to this, more recent studies have begun to examine attrition as a temporal process that considers numerous factors that precede the decision to leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Madigan & Kim, 2021). This section of the literature underscores the importance of considering the role of teachers' intentions, imagined futures and professional aspirations in explaining the broader phenomenon of attrition.

While these studies have introduced greater nuance into the study of attrition, this strand of the literature remains mainly unexplored. This is particularly acute in Ecuador, where no studies have been conducted on the topic. Departing from this noticeable gap, I conducted a qualitative study to examine how early-career teachers perceive their professional identity and how these perceptions influence their intentions to remain or leave the classroom. Using semi-structured interviews, I spoke to nine early-career teachers who graduated with a degree in Education from the same elite university in Ecuador. By exploring their perspectives, I aimed to provide insights into the factors that shape early-career teachers' commitment to their roles and their long-term professional trajectories.

Following the interviews and subsequent analysis, I found the importance of cultivating a strong professional identity amongst early-career teachers as a means of fostering commitment to the field and resilience in the face of the expected precarities of the profession. This strong professional identity emerges from teachers' intrinsic motivations, largely premised on notions of service and their early experiences in the classroom. Moreover, this strong identity provides early-career teachers with a degree of assurance about their futures, which some understand as positive and others, as limiting, as it inhibits any perception of the future beyond being a teacher. Thus, I argue that understanding attrition requires examining the process of teachers' identity formation, while also acknowledging that it can contribute to teachers' disillusionment with their careers.

## **DESARROLLO DEL TEMA**

### **Literature review**

Teacher attrition addresses teacher mobility in its multiple nuances, including temporary stepping away from the profession, transitions to other jobs in the field, or permanently leaving the profession (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012). This final aspect is the one most frequently examined in the literature and will serve as the definition used in this study. Through this lens, attrition becomes somewhat complex to quantify, as it is difficult to accurately measure who has truly left. As a result, research often focuses on teachers' intentions to leave the profession (Räsänen, Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Väisänen, 2020). In this sense, attrition can occur at any point in a teachers' career, however, early-career teachers are most likely to confront intentions of turnover. The term 'early-career teacher' describes teachers going through the first five years of their career. After taking the decision to leave, teachers typically take two or three years to act on it and actually exit the profession (Brandenburg et al., 2024).

Given the high rates of early-career teacher attrition, a significant amount of research has been dedicated to examining the contributing factors. Conventionally, research has opted for concrete explanations, often relying on isolated, contextual framework that unpack attrition as a singular event. In a revision of the literature on attrition, Schaefer, Long and Clandinin (2012) identified two main frameworks around the discussion: individual and structural factors. Individual factors related to a teacher's personal circumstances including their background, resilience, burnout, compatibility with teaching practices and methodologies, classroom challenges, resilience, and the balance between their personal and professional lives. Structural factors refer to organizational and systemic elements, such as workload, availability of resources and opportunities for professional development. In this

context, studies in attrition often embrace a straightforward reasoning, typically focusing on the precarious working conditions commonly associated with teacher attrition.

In the past years, studies have questioned these typical understandings and reinterpreted this dichotomy. Some studies have explored the importance of professional culture and how alienation of early-career teachers influences their intentions to leave (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Building on this, researchers have also examined teacher socialization as a key factor in attrition, emphasizing the value of goal-oriented programs, including mentorship and inductions roles for teacher retention. A main trend in findings is the influence of burnout and exhaustion in attrition, as these increase, so does the likelihood of attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2021). In response to these patterns, some researchers have sought to challenge the negative connotation of attrition. They emphasize separating its positive aspects, such as viewing it as a natural step in a teachers' trajectory within or outside the field, from its negative aspects, such as the emotional weight of leaving a profession that is often regarded as a vocation (Brandenburg et al., 2024).

As research continues to unpack the nuances of teacher attrition, resilience has been identified as a central component in understanding how teachers navigate and endure professional challenges. Teachers face significant day-to-day challenges due to systemic factors like heavy workloads, lack of recognition, poor leadership, and difficult workplace environments (Brandenburg et al., 2024). These challenges often lead to low resilience, which is a major contributing factor to attrition. Arnup and Bowles (2016) found that more than half of teachers in their study planned to leave at some point and 32% showed strong intentions to do so. They identified a connection between low resilience and the likelihood of wanting to leave. Their findings suggest that early-career teachers may have a lower resilience than those further along in their careers, making them more likely to leave the profession.

This correlation emphasizes the importance of understanding resilience as a dynamic and socially influenced concept. Flores (2018) expanded on this idea, suggesting that teacher resilience reflects their sense of purpose during adversity and is shaped by personal, professional and contextual factors. In her research, she found that teachers who were committed, had feelings of self-efficacy, effectiveness, and agency; as well as professional values, identity, sense of professionalism, and vocation, were more likely to remain in teaching. Thus, the author highlights the need to maintain teacher motivation through supportive practices and policies, along with professional development and teacher training that address these factors.

### **Attrition as an identity-making process**

While teacher resilience emphasizes the interplay of motivation, values and purpose during challenges, understanding attrition requires examining how these factors relate to professional identity. Recent research has shifted from viewing attrition as a one-time event to interpreting it as an ongoing process, often informed by the development and evolution of a teacher's identity. This perspective challenges earlier frameworks and underscores the role of socialization in shaping teachers' long-term commitment to their profession.

Schaefer, Long & Clandinin (2012) take this approach by emphasizing that attrition has a dynamic and longitudinal nature, shaped by the interaction of various factors that are integral in identity formation. Clandinin, Downey & Huber (2009) further explored teacher identity by examining the experiences of Canadian teachers who had left the profession, and found that their identities were negotiated and had evolved over time, so that they could no longer sustain them within school settings, prompting them to leave teaching. In another study, Schaefer and Clandinin (2011) found that teachers' personal and professional lives were deeply interconnected and that how they envisioned themselves in the future, or their

imagined stories, were largely shaped by how they managed and supported themselves during their first year.

Therefore, to fully grasp these conceptualizations, it is essential to consider the role of identity. Specifically, professional identity refers to the ongoing process through which teachers engage and negotiate their environment, aspirations and experiences with their sense of purpose, value they assign to their work and their connection to the wider education community (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). The identity building process begins during training programs and is continually evolving as teachers have diverse experiences.

In her study about the professional identity of teacher educators, Kaur (2023) examined how these identities are formed, focusing on three key elements: being, becoming, and belonging. This framework can also be applied to understand the construction of teacher identities more broadly. Being refers to how teachers negotiate their personal and professional identities, aligning their values, beliefs and lives with their professional roles. Becoming relates to the multifaceted nature of their roles, which extend beyond teaching practices to personal involvement with their students. On another hand, belonging emphasizes the influence of connections to various communities within the field, such as academic, subject-specific, and school-based groups. The author e that teachers experience an ‘identity shock’ as they negotiate their roles with their identity, and the importance of support in navigating these shifts.

Another significant component of identity construction is possible selves theory. This framework describes how, based on their identity, an individual thinks about their potential future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It is influenced by their context and experiences, as well as anticipated goals that are perceived as achievable. This lens helps understand behaviors and

motivations, explaining how teachers in different points in their career project themselves in the future, taking into account their goals, aspirations and past experiences.

Using this framework, Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, & Bunuan (2010) reveal the dynamic process of early-career teachers' identity-making process and the role of possible selves. It found that with their changing roles from student teachers to in-service early-career teachers, so do their possible selves. Student teachers focused on task-oriented goals related to their immediate responsibilities, whereas beginning in-service teachers developed quality-centered aspirations related to professional growth. The author highlights the importance of understanding teacher's motivations and challenges to offer support and thus increase retention. The concept "reflection for action" is introduced as a tool to motivate and guide teachers' professional development and align their changing identities, aspirations and practice.

Taking into account these conceptual foundations, research is limited to a few explorations of the relationship between teacher attrition and professional identity. As previously mentioned, much of the literature is focused on explaining the reasons behind teachers leaving and proposing solutions to alleviate these factors. Schaefer et al. (2012) questioned this view and highlighted the importance of prioritizing the individuals behind attrition over external factors. They argue that when entering the profession, early-career teachers are more than learning new roles, rather, they are learning new identities. Thus, it is key to address these identities in order to understand their views on their careers and attrition. Few more research has had a similar approach. Yang & Wang (2023) examined the relationship between professional identity, self-efficacy and teacher attrition for language teachers. It found a correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and professional identity in attrition intention. The stronger the professional identity and feeling of self-efficacy, the less

likely attrition is. As teachers perceive themselves to be more capable and professional, the less intentions of attrition.

Furthermore, Hong (2010) studied the interaction between early-career teachers' identity and attrition. It argues that teachers experience a disconnect between their expectations and their identity before entering the first years of teaching. Teachers perceive their professional identity as strong enough to withstand the emotional process that is teaching, and do not expect the extent of burnout during their first years. Teachers experience a disconnect between expectations and reality of teaching, which leads to higher levels of burnout, as teachers don't have realistic understandings of what's to come in their professions.

Building on these insights, this study aims to explore the nuances behind early-career teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession, with a particular focus on Ecuador, where research on this phenomenon is scarce. By examining internal processes of identity formation and the interactions with external contexts, I sought to address gaps in the literature, which hasn't prioritized internal and identity processes in understanding attrition, as well as understanding the implications of this process in teachers' aspirations and projections in the future, beyond leaving the field.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to better understand early-career teachers' professional intentions, in the hope to better understand what motivates or perhaps discourages them from remaining in the field. To address this goal, I conducted a qualitative study with nine early-career teachers who had less than five years of teaching experienced after graduating. Some teachers had previous teaching experienced that happened before getting their degrees. All participants majored in Education from the same elite, private university in Ecuador. The private university all participants attended is renowned for its liberal arts focus and its



commitment to socializing high-quality educators. Moreover, it emphasizes a cutting-edge methodology, prioritizes quality education, and boasts an experienced faculty.

Although all participants graduated from the same institution, they now work in different private schools across the country, ranging from elite institutions from low-income settings. Furthermore, being graduates of an elite university, participants carry certain expectations to perform at a high level and embody ideals instilled through their academic socialization process. These ideals include a commitment to continuous personal and professional improvement, a reflective and self-critical attitude, and a proactive approach to addressing local and global challenges. This diversity offers valuable insights into how professional identity is shaped through various contexts and challenges, creating different tensions that could influence their career trajectories.

Participants were selected using purposeful and convenience sampling approaches. Selected participants were educators by profession, meaning they intentionally entered the field. Moreover, they were all early-career teachers, as they could represent the section of the teacher population with highest numbers of attrition. Following these inclusion criteria, I reached out to potential participants, who I knew personally and fit the criteria. This approach was designed to target individuals who had undergone a similar socialization process, as all participants earned their degrees within a three-year timeframe. After graduation, they transitioned into diverse teaching contexts, providing a range of experiences. The final sample included nine early-career teachers, from which seven work at elite schools and two work at low-cost schools. Their inclusion was critical to approach how early-career teachers understand their professional trajectories and the factors influencing their decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Data collection relied primarily on semi-structure interviews with nine participants. The interview, which lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours, were designed to provide rich, in-depth insights into teachers' understandings of their professional trajectories and factors that have shaped their decisions. Participants were asked to reflect on their projections in the future from different points in their career, starting from their academic socialization to their current work experiences. Interview questions covered their background and professional experience; motivations and expectations created before and during their studies; their early experiences and mindset shifts that might have stemmed from them; and future projections, including long-term professional aspirations and the role that they ascribe to teaching in their trajectories. The decision to use semi-structured interviews stemmed from their ability to balance consistency with flexibility, allowing for the exploration of key themes while adapting to the unique perspectives of each participant. This approach was particularly suited to this study's purpose of understanding nuanced behind early-career teacher attrition. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and the data exemplars provided in the findings section are my own translations.

The analysis process involved two complementary steps. Initially, I conducted inductive analysis where emerging insights were formally documented as analytical memos. These memos served as a foundation for developing a coding scheme that captured key ideas from the data. Subsequently, I engaged in a largely deductive analysis by systematically applying the coding scheme to the entire dataset. This approach facilitated the identification of overarching themes and patterns that addressed the research question.

Through this process, I identified themes that build on one another to create a progressive understanding of these teachers' experiences, including the influence of motivations and early experiences in shaping teachers' professional identity, professional identity as a tool to navigate expected precarities in the profession, a strong sense of identity

as reassurance for the future, and unease about the future rooted in this strong sense of identity. Once these themes were established, I examined their relationships and hypothesized assertions that synthesized the findings into cohesive interpretations of teachers' perceptions of the future.

## **Findings**

Through this study, I aimed to better understand teacher attrition by delving into the motivations and personal intentions of early-career teachers. By examining participants' perspectives, I identified themes that build on one another to create a progressive understanding of their professional intentions and projections of the future.

### **Identity as a tool for resilience**

One pattern that was consistent throughout the interviews was how strong participants' convictions about teaching were. When asked about their motivations to enter and remain in the field, all participants stressed the role of service in their decisions. This notion of service consisted of contributing to education through fostering meaningful relationships and supporting students' academically and emotionally, highlighting the wider societal impact they wanted to have. In teaching, participants' found a career that allowed them to live out this value. Gabriela, a librarian and language arts teacher, recognized service as the nature of teaching, describing it as "very noble, very beautiful". Similarly, José, a recent graduate and math teacher, echoed this sentiment, sharing why he entered the profession, "I didn't do it for myself, but I said, I really want to do something (...) that impacts others. It was the idea of searching for a purpose bigger than myself". This pursuit of having a far-reaching effect reflects the broader trend within participants' thought processes, where their professional aspirations are deeply intertwined with their personal values and goals.

For these teachers, choosing their professional paths was not merely about selecting a career; it was a deeply existential decision that reflected their search for purpose. Moreover, this quest involved their desire to fulfill an integral part of their identity. During our conversation, Camila, a first-year full-time teacher, frequently joked about teaching being an intrinsic part of her. She elaborated on this conviction, stating that “being a teacher is not everything about me, but it is a part of me. It’s a piece of the puzzle that makes Camila”. For Camila and the rest of the participants, their commitment to teaching wasn’t only about outwardly contributing to society, it encompassed a deeply internalized part of themselves that shaped their identity as teachers. Across conversations, participants consistently framed teaching as a vocation rooted in a sense of service, closely aligning their sense of purpose with the wider contributions they hoped to have. This alignment between personal purpose and professional input highlights why participants view teaching as a vocation connected to their identities.

As participants considered teaching more than a profession, but a deeply ingrained part of their identity, the overlap between their personal goals and professional role became more significant. This merging strengthened their identity as teachers, but it also fostered a sense of commitment to their professional roles in the face of the harsh realities of the profession. While most participants expected to encounter challenges during their academic preparation, many struggled with feelings of disappointment, overwhelm, and frustration as they confronted the precarities of the job. Camila, for example, reflected on this disconnect of expectations, noting, “I didn’t expect to be recognized, but I did expect respect as a professional”. These challenges, which they had not anticipated during their academic socialization, included heavy workloads, frequent rotations, addressing students' socio-emotional needs, communicating with parents, and adhering to demanding curricula as some of their unmet expectations. Although these challenges create moments of frustration,

participants often accept them as inherent to the profession, viewing their role as teachers as inseparable from these realities.

However, instead of experiencing demotivation that pushed them out of their roles, participants remained strongly committed to teaching. For Camila, this commitment is rooted in a personal connection to the profession, as she remarked that “it’s worth the suffering because (...) it’s something that’s always been a part of me”. Similarly, José perceived these adversities as an intrinsic part of the profession, yet deserving to overcome: “I decided that it was something worthwhile, all the sacrifice and everything is something that goes with the profession and that is part of it”. For participants’, it is commendable to rise above the challenges.

Even when confronted with this precarious reality, their sustained dedication remained, which stemmed from a deep integration of their personal and professional identities. Sarah, a second-year teacher, mentioned that, for her, the positives outweighed the negatives. She underscored the joy she finds in collaborating with her fellow teachers, communicating with parents and witnessing her students’ growth, describing these experiences as “amazing” and as “something that also fills me internally”. Being a teacher, for Sarah and the rest of participants, goes beyond the negative day-to-day experiences in the classroom and becomes a way to fulfill a broader life purpose. Being a teacher is more than what they do – it is who they are. The emotional and personal rewards they receive from their work overshadow the struggles they face, their strong identity becoming the tool they use to navigate these difficulties.

As a tool, their identity bolstered their resilience and allowed them to view challenges as worth overcoming, as they align with their wider purpose of serving others. Therefore, teaching becomes engrossing. The lines between professional responsibilities and personal

fulfillment blur, making their role as teachers inseparable from their identity. This sense of purpose both drives their commitment and sustains them emotionally, operating in a reciprocal relationship: it is how participants contribute to others, but it is also how they enrich their sense of selves. This personal enrichment is solidified by early experiences in the classroom. Gabriela, this purpose is articulated in her initial aspirations, sharing how her dream of transforming education continues to drive her forward:

I'm still excited about the education career because I started out with a dream and now I'm building that dream. I feel that's why I haven't given up (...) because I'm very moved by this feeling of wanting to change education. Even though I tell you, 'I have 14 classes and it's very tiring', at the end of the day, I feel so happy to see a child reading, to see a child telling me 'Gabi, I loved the class'

Gabriela's reflection illustrates how participants' search of purpose and personal fulfillment blend with their professional aspirations and converge in a long-lasting motivation. These early moments in the classroom serve as pivotal experiences that consolidate the unification of their identities, ultimately underscoring the centrality of teaching to their sense of self.

This interplay between personal and professional underscores a shared sense of assurance that teaching provides for them. When asked about the role that teaching has in their overall professional careers, participants held diverse views on the exact place it has in their trajectories. However, within these diverse meanings, all teachers found a degree of assurance about their futures. As the line between personal and professional blurred, the perception of their work and selves blurred as well, making difficult to imagine an identity outside of work, and a job in which their identity doesn't play a role. Thus, teaching becomes an assured piece of their future, beyond their day-to-day contractual obligations. However,

how they valued and reacted to this stability varied, attributing it a positive or negative role in their imagined futures.

### **Teaching as a life-long career**

For some participants, teaching represents a welcoming and secure career path. As they find fulfillment and purpose in their careers, they embrace their multifaceted identities, fostering a lasting commitment that drives their desire to remain in the profession indefinitely. Laura, who is in her second year of teaching, shared that during her summer break, she felt lost at home with nothing to do and realized that she truly loved the “chaos” of the classroom: “So from that point on, I said, I will never be able to do anything that is not being a teacher”. When asked about the reasons behind this, she emotionally articulated: “Because I love it. I don’t know how to explain it (...) I think it’s just because I’m happy doing my job”. Laura, like other participants, was certain that teaching was the career path for her. Her reflection challenges research on possible selves, as her identity and future projections remain unchanged despite changes in contextual experiences (Hamman et al., 2010). This might be due to her strong sense of identity that anchors her present commitment but also shapes her view of the future. This projection to the future, due to their strong identity, is confined to the classroom.

Due to this, it is uncommon and unexpected to imagine alternative paths. When asked about where they projected themselves in the upcoming years, most participants struggled to suggest paths different to teaching. In part, they stated that they felt uncomfortable thinking about their long-term future, and thus were unable to articulate a future long-term. However, when asked about whether they would consider other career paths, either within or outside of education, participants responded that it was not something they were currently considered,

although some remained open to the possibility. Some were even hesitant to engage with questions about their future. For instance, Laura stated:

I don't think I have any other option that is not being a teacher because of how being a teacher makes me feel (...). To me, being a teacher is rewarding. So, I don't see myself doing anything else because for me there is nothing more rewarding than being a teacher.

This sense of fulfillment reflects participants' confidence in their future as teachers. Many viewed teaching as a lifelong career and actively expressed their desire to remain in the profession. The extent of this certainty is that participants' possible selves are contained within the teaching and school context. Being asked to envision futures outside of teaching was a source of discomfort, perceiving such scenarios as a challenge to their identity and self-concept. While structural constraints about teaching are cited by a significant amount of literature as a primary cause for attrition, these participants exhibit a contrasting experience, where their strong identity pulls them further into the profession despite precarity. Therefore, a strong identity seems to mitigate any negative impact that challenges might have on them remaining in the profession, as they don't perceive them as determining factors for leaving. Manuela, a second-grade teacher, acknowledges that challenges contribute to her fatigue. However, she expresses a strong desire to remain in teaching as her ultimate goal, even though she is open to exploring other roles, such as transitioning into administrative positions

I do like being a teacher, I do like the classroom. But like I told you, I will get tired at some point. So, like, rotating, but always going back to being a teacher, always going back to the classroom.

Manuela's willingness to rotate roles in her career, but always return to teaching, underscores the resilience and adaptability that underpin her commitment to the profession.



This assurance reinforces a strong professional identity, aligning with the idea that for many participants, teaching represents not just a career but a fundamental part of their personal identity and their future self-concept. Not only this, but they it poses a reassurance for them: they don't need to consider anything else because of how strongly established their identity is.

### **Teaching as a stepping stone**

For other participants, teaching serves as a positive and secure stepping stone within their broader career trajectories. Many participants described teaching as a transitional phase, in which they view their current classroom experiences as opportunities for growth and skill-building, recognizing it as a significant but not final chapter in their professional lives. Gabriela, for instance, reflected on her teaching experience as a stepping stone: “I would say that this chapter is a little to gain experience and then properly take the decision of what I will be the rest of my life”.

Internal motivations, such as the desire to prove their self-worth or achieve greater impact outside the classroom, drive them to envision goals beyond teaching. For many participants, teaching serves as a proving ground that allows them to validate their sense of self-worth, contributing to their identity construction and underscoring the role of service in it. Camila expressed her contrasting thoughts about the long-lasting impact that being outside the classroom can have in education overall: “I feel that I could help (more) from the outside than from the inside, because I feel that, if I stay inside, I'll end up drowning at some point, but from the outside I feel like I could help”. Teaching provides a productive and safe space for participants as they await future roles. Their identity sustains their commitment to the profession, allowing them to value their work despite acknowledging it is a temporary phase. This duality highlights two key insights: participants do not perceive precarities as definitive

reasons to leave teaching; and their identity as teachers informs their aspirations, even as they seek opportunities outside of teaching.

This stage is approached by participants with genuine appreciation. They value teaching for its influence and security while using it as a foundation for broader aspirations. María, for example, acknowledged the likelihood leaving the classroom, explaining that she envisions teaching as an important experience that will support her future endeavors:

I think it is such an important experience because (...) it will nurture the things I do afterwards (...). I think that when I stop being a classroom teacher, that will be a door that is like, something that stayed behind (...). Once I leave, yes, I close the door, and just keep going.

María's perspective on leaving the classroom reflects the critical experience that teaching can be for participants, who view it as natural first step in their trajectories. It is a pivotal stage where they develop skills and build aspirations, while also providing a sense of security in a sometimes uncertain and precarious career.

While some participants viewed teaching as a formative experience that supports their future aspirations, others, express a more critical perspective, shaped by the systemic limitations of the profession. Miguel, a first-year teacher, acknowledged the practicality of teaching as a secure and accessible option, despite being sure that it is not his end-goal: "Thinking mostly about those moments more of, crisis, or issues that could go wrong, wherever I am, I will be the teacher". He expressed confidence in the teaching profession's stability, noting that his skills and experience would enable him to work anywhere and despite any extenuating circumstances, perceiving the job market as receiving and available. However, he also experiences a degree of fatalism that comes from the external factors that lead to attrition, which he shares in a moment of reflection:

I feel like it's a very systemic problem (...) Like the cushion is so close to the ceiling that it's like you get bored too fast. And I know, I know that I won't be more than 5 years... 5 years seem like a lot in the same place. As a teacher.

For him, teaching is a transitional phase that can become a fallback option. Despite having “moments of crisis” in which he might not achieve his other goals that are beyond teaching, this participant relies on teaching as a safe place, a cushion where he can fall back if things don't go as planned. He recognized that teaching is central to his identity and serves as a fallback option, as well as becoming an all-encompassing force that guides his career decisions. Knowing that he has this safe place doesn't allow him to think beyond teaching. Experiencing this tension makes the profession feel confining. Through this metaphor, he compares the profession to a “cushion” that is too close to the ceiling, which illustrates a perceived lack of upward mobility within teaching. This tension between internalized values of service and the systemic challenges within teaching shapes how participants navigate their professional trajectories. Thus, factors such as limited opportunities for advancement and the overlap between personal and professional identities lead him to view teaching as a stage to be surpassed, as it contributes to a desire for change. He elaborated on this idea further, referring to his current role as a teacher: “If I really want to have expectations or dream about other things, I can't be here”. Thus, teaching serves as both a stepping stone and a safety net, offering security while participants explore broader aspirations.

These participants' perspectives highlight the tension between the fulfilling aspects of teaching and the limitations of the profession, such as stagnant career growth. Participants' identity as teachers is not solely defined by their professional role; it is also shaped by their internalized values of service, which continue to guide their decisions even when faced with the systemic challenges of the profession. However, for them the duality of teaching as both fulfilling and constraining is clear. While their strong identity and aspiration to serve are what

sustains their commitment, they are not untouched by the reality that teaching may not offer the long-term growth or diversity they seek professionally.

Ultimately, teaching remains a meaningful and influential stage for these participants that provides reassurance of a job and future in education. However, its role as both a stepping stone and a constraint highlights the complex interplay between professional identity and career aspirations, as it has broader implications about their engagement with their professional trajectories.

### **Reassurances as roots of unease**

While a strong professional identity provides reassurance, it can also create discomfort, as participants struggle to articulate futures beyond the classroom. This tension highlights the duality of professional identity: it offers stability but can also constrain aspirations. When asked about their future aspirations, participants were either able to articulate a very specific future within teaching, despite what role they perceived it had in their trajectories, or were uncomfortable with the questions posed about the future. The participants who were uncomfortable with this question found this as a challenge.

Miguel described how his goals and aspirations seemed to vanish as his career path became narrowly focused on teaching after his early experiences in the classroom: “My goals of what I was going to do vanished so, so quickly”. This abrupt collapse of ambitions reflects the all-encompassing nature of his professional identity. Teaching, while fulfilling, also limits participants’ capacity to dream of alternative futures. He elaborated on this sentiment: “Any spark was put off; I feel like that there isn’t space to dream (...) the path is too decided”. Here, he captures the emotional toll of feeling confined within a rigid career path that was not originally his plan, and stems from the disconnects experienced early on. Opportunities for exploration and growth appear inaccessible, and teaching, predetermined.

## CONCLUSIONES

Throughout this study, I explored the experiences of early-career teachers within very specific cultural and socioeconomic contexts. However, these findings shed light on some of the realities in Ecuador, particularly given the lack of studies addressing this topic and context. What emerges from these results is the importance of cultivating a strong professional identity among early-career teachers as a means of fostering commitment to the field and resilience in the face of the expected precarities of the profession. This strong professional identity stems from teachers' intrinsic motivations, which are largely rooted in conceptions of service, and their early experiences in the field.

Moreover, a strong professional identity provides early-career teachers with a degree of assurance about their futures, though this can be perceived in positive or negative ways. Some teachers find comfort in the idea that teaching can be a lifelong career, while others develop a lasting appreciation for the profession despite knowing they may not remain as teachers in the long term. However, for some participants, this strong identity feels constraining, as it limits their ability to envision futures beyond teaching. This is evident in the difficulty participants had in articulating aspirations outside of teaching, even those who were inclined of pursuing other goals.

From these findings, several key takeaways can be extrapolated. First, when discussing teacher attrition, these results indicate that attributing attrition solely to systemic factors, especially just precarity, is insufficient to understand attrition. This framework fails to explain why teachers choose to stay: it fails to explore the complex interplay of factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in the profession despite significant challenges. Focusing exclusively on precarity perpetuates the narrative of "inevitability" in attrition that many participants admit to having, framing teaching as inherently precarious and attrition as

unavoidable. However, these findings suggest a more nuanced reality, where external and internal factors interact with personal motivations, making attrition less inevitable than traditionally framed. This aligns with Schaefer, Long and Clandinin's (2012) explorations on teacher attrition being rooted in teachers' identity-making process, highlighting the importance of the interplay of factors throughout a teachers' career and the significance of an integral approach.

For the participants in this study, teaching was more than a profession – it was an existential decision tied to their search for purpose. Despite facing precarities, they remained committed to the profession because teaching fulfilled them personally and aligned with their values and aspirations. This aligns with the literature on the process of identity-building proposed by Kaur (2023), in which teachers are, become and belong as teachers, framing this process as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that goes beyond fulfilling contractual obligations.

However, addressing attrition through the lens of identity brings to light new complexities. This study's findings and literature emphasize the critical role of identity in teacher retention, as it fosters resilience not only professionally, but also on a personal level. However, when we speak of a strong identity, we must critically examine the implications of invoking the concept of vocation. While this notion can inspire commitment, it risks reinforcing a static identity that restricts teachers' ability to reimagine their professional trajectories. It limits their capacity to envision futures outside of teaching, leaving some feeling confined to their current professional roles.

This rigidity creates a sense of unease and stagnation. For instance, Miguel expressed a desire to explore other possibilities, but felt "stuck" due to his strong professional identity and commitment to teaching. These findings raise concerns about frameworks that prioritize

retention over teachers' broader career aspirations and trajectories. Retaining teachers without addressing their long-term goals risks fostering dissatisfaction and possibly, eventual burnout, undermining the very resilience that professional identity seeks to build.

By situating these findings in Ecuador's context, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature, offering insight into teacher attrition and identity. However, the study has limitations that must be considered to adopt a nuanced and critical approach to these findings. The small sample size limits the ability to generalize the results, as participants represent a subset of the population with similar motivations and academic socialization. A more diverse sample might yield contrasting outcomes and uncover additional factors influencing attrition. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this study makes it difficult to attribute causality, posing challenges in establishing direct relationships between teachers' intentions to leave and the reasons behind these decisions.

These limitations, combined with the lack of research in the Ecuadorian context, underscore the need for further research to understand the dynamics of teacher attrition and retention across different settings. Nonetheless, this study sheds light on a framework that is often overlooked, calling for a nuanced understanding of attrition, and emphasizing the importance of supporting and prioritizing educators' evolving trajectories.

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