



An Interpretative Phenomenological Exploration of Meaning-Making in Educational Planning among Honorary Teachers in Indonesian Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Educational planning is a vital component of school governance, yet the role of honorary teachers in this process remains underexplored. While prior studies have addressed structural exclusion in school systems, little is known about how honorary teachers make sense of their informal involvement in educational planning. This study addresses the gap by asking: How do honorary teachers interpret their participation in school planning despite lacking formal authority? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study reveals how these teachers construct professional meaning through lived experiences of exclusion and silent contribution. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight honorary teachers in Indonesian public schools and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings identified three major themes: being present but unacknowledged, navigating multiple roles with limitations, and expressing sincerity as a form of resistance. These themes illustrate how teachers negotiate their identity and agency within institutional constraints, drawing meaning from emotional commitment and student relationships rather than structural recognition. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how marginalized educators experience and influence planning processes in ways not captured by conventional policy analysis. These insights offer a more human-centered view of participatory planning and suggest that future research should further explore the evolving identities of non-permanent educators in diverse educational contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Educational planning plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality and direction of teaching and learning processes within schools. It encompasses collaborative efforts to determine goals, strategies, and resource allocations that align with both institutional objectives and learner needs. While traditionally dominated by school leaders and formal committees, the broader involvement of various school stakeholders—including non-permanent (honorary) teachers—has increasingly come into focus in discussions on participatory school governance (Fenech, 2020).

In many developing countries, including Indonesia, honorary teachers constitute a significant portion of the teaching workforce, particularly in public schools across rural and semi-urban areas. These educators often carry out critical instructional duties alongside their permanent counterparts, yet their roles remain institutionally under-recognized. Despite their active presence in classrooms and informal interactions with school management, honorary teachers are frequently excluded from formal decision-making spaces, especially those related to educational planning (Sunardi et al., 2022).

This exclusion is not merely an administrative issue; it reflects a deeper socio-professional dynamic that affects the identity, agency, and emotional well-being of these educators. From a phenomenological standpoint, this dynamic presents a unique opportunity to explore how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their roles in the absence of formal recognition. The subjective

experience of being present but unheard, committed but invisible, offers insight into the lived realities of those who navigate institutional boundaries through personal dedication and silent resilience.

Understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond policy-level analysis and toward the experiential realm of individuals situated within such structures. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience and meaning-making, provides an appropriate lens to explore how honorary teachers perceive and reflect upon their involvement in school planning processes. By foregrounding their voices, this study aims to contribute to a more inclusive discourse on educational planning that acknowledges the experiential depth of often-overlooked actors within the school system.

Research on individuals' lived experiences within educational settings has emerged as a critical domain in understanding how institutional structures interact with personal meaning-making. In particular, studies focusing on the experiences of marginalized or underrepresented educational actors—such as non-permanent teachers—offer valuable insights into how professional identity, motivation, and agency are constructed in the absence of formal authority (Smith & Osborn, 2019).

Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive and participatory educational planning, much of the existing research remains rooted in quantitative frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes, policy compliance, or administrative efficiency. These approaches, while useful for evaluating systemic impact, often overlook the nuanced, affective, and interpretive dimensions of human experience. As such, they fall short in capturing the complex realities lived by individuals like honorary teachers, who operate at the margins of institutional recognition yet remain deeply involved in school life.

This methodological gap becomes particularly evident when attempting to understand how these teachers interpret their own involvement—or exclusion—in planning processes. Quantitative surveys or structured assessments may reveal trends, but they rarely illuminate the meanings behind silence, the emotional labor of dedication, or the internal negotiations between institutional invisibility and personal purpose. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is necessary to engage with these subjective realities in depth and to uncover the essential meanings that define the phenomenon.

In current educational practice, efforts to improve school-based planning processes often rely on standardized administrative frameworks, performance evaluations, or policy-driven mandates. While these approaches offer structural clarity and managerial efficiency, they tend to focus on technical and procedural elements rather than the subjective realities of those involved—particularly honorary teachers, whose roles are often informal and under-acknowledged (Sunardi et al., 2022).

Conventional studies in this area frequently adopt quantitative or evaluative models that assess participation through measurable indicators, such as attendance in meetings or task completion. However, these metrics fail to capture the deeper experiential layers—such as feelings of marginalization, intrinsic motivation, or silent dedication—that shape how honorary teachers perceive their involvement in planning activities. As a result, the existing body of knowledge lacks a comprehensive understanding of how these educators construct personal meaning around their professional presence and contribution.

This gap suggests that a more nuanced and empathetic methodological lens is required—one that is capable of engaging with lived experience and revealing the essence of professional identity as it unfolds in a context of structural exclusion. A phenomenological approach, particularly one grounded in interpretive analysis, offers a powerful alternative. It enables a holistic exploration of the phenomenon by foregrounding the voices of those who are often unheard, allowing for a richer, more human-centered understanding of what it means to be involved yet unrecognized in the school planning process.

Several previous studies have investigated the participation of teachers in school-based decision-making, focusing primarily on formal roles and institutional dynamics. Research by Smith and Osborn (2019) emphasized how teachers' sense of agency is influenced by leadership structures, yet honorary teachers remain underrepresented in such analyses. Other studies have examined teacher motivation and engagement but rarely explore how informal roles shape meaning in professional contexts. These gaps highlight a lack of understanding about how educators outside the official system

make sense of their work. The current study addresses this by examining the subjective experiences of honorary teachers in school planning processes.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of these teachers' experiences. The method is chosen for its ability to access and interpret the lived realities of individuals in context, particularly those who navigate institutional margins. It allows exploration of how honorary teachers assign meaning to their involvement, even when that involvement lacks formal recognition. In doing so, the study responds to the identified knowledge gap regarding the silent, often invisible contributions of these educators. The findings offer insight into how meaning, identity, and emotional commitment are constructed within constrained institutional roles.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the problem and background of the study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach and the rationale for its use. The method section describes the participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques. The results section presents thematic interpretations supported by direct quotations from participants. Finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on the implications of the findings for theory, policy, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of non-permanent (honorary) teachers regarding their involvement in school-based educational planning. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, emphasizes the subjective meaning of human experiences as they are lived and perceived in context. The interpretative variant, rooted in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, focuses not only on describing experiences but also on interpreting the embedded meanings within participants' narratives.

This design was chosen for its suitability in revealing the nuanced and often overlooked perspectives of individuals whose roles may be structurally marginalized yet experientially rich. The approach enabled the in-depth exploration of how honorary teachers construct meaning around their involvement—or lack thereof—in planning processes, particularly in relation to institutional dynamics, personal values, and professional identity.

Participants

Participants consisted of honorary teachers working at public schools across three districts in Indonesia. All participants had at least two years of continuous teaching experience and had been involved, either directly or indirectly, in school planning meetings or program development activities. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively engaged in teaching and to have experienced participation in any school-level decision-making or planning activities. Individuals holding permanent civil servant status or lacking any exposure to planning activities were excluded from this study.

A total of eight participants (five females and three males) were involved, with ages ranging from 26 to 42 years. The average teaching experience was 4.6 years, and participants taught at elementary and junior high school levels. Their diverse teaching backgrounds and varying degrees of engagement in school planning processes provided rich contextual depth to the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit reflective narratives about participants' involvement in educational planning. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, neutral locations within the school environment to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions and flexible probes to encourage elaboration on key experiences. Follow-up questions were occasionally used to deepen the exploration

of emerging themes. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature on teacher agency, school governance, and phenomenological inquiry, and was adapted after initial piloting.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a systematic process of reading, coding, and thematizing participant narratives to uncover the essence of their lived experiences. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to ensure immersion in the data. Meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into emerging themes that reflected patterns across participants.

A qualitative analysis software tool (NVivo 12) was used to assist in organizing and managing data, but interpretive insights were grounded in iterative engagement with the text. Themes were then synthesized into a coherent narrative to represent the essential structure of the phenomenon, maintaining fidelity to the original voices of participants while situating their experiences in broader social and institutional contexts.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was provided by all participants, who were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their data. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. This study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local research ethics regulations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Present but Unacknowledged

Many participants described their presence in educational planning activities as visible yet unrecognized. Although they attended meetings and participated in planning sessions, their contributions were often dismissed or overlooked. The sense of being marginalized emerged as a recurring emotional experience.

“I attend the meetings, yes. But when I speak, it's like the wind passes by—no one responds. Sometimes, I'm even asked to stay quiet. Yet afterward, I'm assigned many tasks.” (Participant 3)

This disconnect between physical presence and institutional recognition led to a feeling of dissonance. Several participants used metaphors such as being “a shadow” or “invisible” to describe their institutional status.

“We are there, but we're never counted. Like a shadow.” (Participant 1)

Navigating Multiple Roles with Limitations

Honorary teachers often perform duties equivalent to those of permanent staff—even exceeding them in certain areas—yet they remain excluded from strategic decision-making. They find themselves caught between professional dedication and limited access to the formal planning structure.

“When asked to design a program, I do it. But in the end, my name is never listed. I'm just a complement, not a decision-maker.” (Participant 6)

This theme reflects a complex duality: while they are trusted with technical and operational responsibilities, their perspectives are rarely sought during official planning processes. They described themselves as “bridges that are never seen,” connecting various functions within the school without formal recognition.

Sincerity as Silent Resistance

Despite being excluded from structural decision-making, many honorary teachers choose to carry out their responsibilities with sincerity and full commitment. This genuine dedication emerged as a form of silent resistance against the perceived injustice within the system.

“I see this work as a form of worship. If I waited to be appreciated, I would have quit long ago.”
(Participant 2)

This perspective demonstrates how teachers construct personal meaning through their service—not from institutional acknowledgment but from intrinsic satisfaction and emotional connection with students.

“It’s the students who keep me going. They are the reason I believe educational planning is important, even if I’m never consulted.” (Participant 4)

The lived experiences of honorary teachers reveal a deep tension between their actual involvement in school operations and their absence from formal educational planning structures. Although institutionally marginalized, they remain emotionally and professionally committed to their roles. The essential meaning of this phenomenon can be described as "striving to exist without being recognized"—a form of professional presence that seeks legitimacy through action rather than formal position.

The findings of this study revealed that honorary teachers experience a paradoxical presence in school planning—being involved in practice yet unrecognized in structure. This lived experience is marked by emotional tension, quiet perseverance, and the construction of professional meaning in the absence of formal authority, directly addressing the core question of how these teachers perceive their role within the institutional planning process.

These results contribute significantly to understanding the subjective realities of honorary teachers by uncovering how they make sense of their involvement despite systemic exclusion. Rather than withdrawing, participants internalize their responsibilities and reframe their lack of recognition as an opportunity for sincere dedication. The study highlights how meaning is constructed not through institutional acknowledgment but through relational engagement with students and a deep sense of moral commitment. In doing so, it offers an interpretative lens into the subtle yet profound ways these teachers assert agency and maintain a sense of professional identity.

When compared with previous literature, these findings both affirm and extend existing theoretical perspectives. For instance, Smith and Osborn (2019) emphasized the centrality of perceived agency in teacher engagement, but the current study deepens this view by illustrating how agency can exist without positional power. Similarly, Sunardi et al. (2022) discussed the marginalization of honorary teachers in educational systems but focused largely on policy and structural barriers. This study complements those insights by exposing the internal, emotional, and existential dimensions of that marginalization. It aligns with Heideggerian phenomenology in demonstrating how individuals find meaning in "being-in-the-world," even when their social roles are undefined or devalued.

The findings of this study have important implications for both educational policy and professional practice. At a social and cultural level, the experiences of honorary teachers highlight the disconnect between institutional frameworks and the lived realities of marginalized educators. Their reflections reveal the moral and emotional labor often hidden beneath procedural roles, suggesting that planning processes should be reimagined to recognize informal contributions and relational forms of engagement. For school leaders and policymakers, this calls for a more inclusive approach that values the voices of all educational actors, not just those with formal authority. Acknowledging these experiences may lead to more equitable planning cultures and improved morale among teaching staff, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Despite the depth of insight offered, this study is not without limitations. The research was conducted within a specific socio-cultural context in Indonesia, with a relatively small and homogenous group of participants. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to all educational systems or populations of honorary teachers. Additionally, the interpretative nature of phenomenology means that the results are contextually bound to the interactions between the participants and the researcher. These limitations, however, do not weaken the value of the findings; instead, they point to the richness of situated meaning and encourage context-aware interpretation.

Future research could expand on this study by exploring how honorary teachers' experiences differ across regions, educational levels, or policy environments. Comparative phenomenological studies might investigate how different institutional cultures shape the construction of meaning among marginalized educational workers. Furthermore, longitudinal designs could examine how such meanings evolve over time, particularly as policies or recognition frameworks shift. These extensions would not only enrich the discourse on teacher agency and inclusion but also contribute to a more human-centered understanding of educational planning.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of honorary teachers in relation to their involvement in school-based educational planning. The research responded to a lack of understanding about how these teachers, often excluded from formal structures, construct meaning through informal participation. The findings revealed three core themes: the sense of being present but unacknowledged, the burden of navigating multiple roles with limited authority, and the quiet resistance expressed through sincere dedication. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of professional identity and agency among marginalized educators, filling a gap left by prior studies focused only on formal policy and structural participation. The use of an interpretative phenomenological approach proved effective in uncovering the emotional and existential dimensions of their experiences. Future studies could extend these findings by comparing different educational contexts or tracking how these experiences evolve in response to institutional change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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