

# THE STORY OF SARDOS: NAVIGATING POVERTY, PERSEVERANCE, AND PURPOSE

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**ABSTRACT:** *The persistence of Students-at-Risk of Dropping Out (SARDOs) remains a critical concern in the Philippine education system, particularly within the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) strand. Despite existing government and institutional interventions, dropout cases continue to occur, warranting an in-depth exploration of how educational leaders navigate this phenomenon. This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences and insights of two school leaders—a guidance counsellor and a head teacher—at a large secondary high school in Northern Bukidnon, Philippines. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework, guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. Five major themes emerged: economic struggles, resource inadequacy, institutional support, family and community partnerships, and student motivation. The narratives highlighted the impact of poverty, lack of tools and materials, and the value of home visitation, remediation programs, and student empowerment initiatives. Findings underscore the multifaceted nature of SARDOs and emphasise the need for holistic, relational approaches that nurture students' autonomy, competence, and support systems. The study affirms the power of narrative inquiry in capturing context-specific, human-centred responses to the SARDO issue in TVL education.*

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Department of Education, Dropout, Education, Motivation, SARDO, Senior High School, TVL

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of school dropout continues to be a critical global issue, deeply rooted in complex personal, socio-economic, academic, and psychological contexts[1], [2]. SARDOs typically grapple with profound challenges such as socio-economic hardships, academic struggles, and psychological pressures, which significantly impact their educational trajectories[3],[4]. For instance, in the United States, dropout rates are notably uneven across racial and ethnic groups, with American Indian/Alaska Native students experiencing a dropout rate of 9.9% compared to only 1.9% for Asian students in 2022[5]. Similar trends can be observed in other developed and developing nations, where dropout rates are influenced by poverty, limited access to educational resources, and socio-cultural factors that hinder student retention[6]. While various global interventions have sought to reduce dropout rates[7], there remains a need to understand more deeply the detailed personal and collective narratives that shape students' educational decisions[8].

In developing countries, such as the Philippines, the dropout crisis is even more pronounced, significantly influenced by poverty, socio-cultural dynamics, and inadequate school resources. According to a report from the Philippine Statistics Authority [9], approximately one in ten Filipinos aged 6 to 24 years is classified as an out-of-school youth. Although overall school attendance slightly improved by 2022, significant regional disparities persist, with higher attendance rates in MIMAROPA and Eastern Visayas compared to lower rates in regions like Zamboanga Peninsula and BARMM [10]. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified pre-existing dropout risks globally, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged populations. The pandemic forced millions of students out of classrooms, worsening socio-economic vulnerabilities and widening educational inequalities, especially in remote and rural areas where access to digital learning and support systems was severely limited[11], [12].

Although schools have resumed face-to-face learning, the aftermath continues to influence students' engagement and retention, particularly among those enrolled in the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) strand of Senior High School (SHS). Despite numerous policy and intervention efforts—such as the *PantawidPamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps)[13], Education Service Contracting (ESC)[14], and Alternative Learning System (ALS)[15], as well as TESDA certifications—the complexity of individual students' experiences and the distinct reasons behind their continued dropout decisions remain inadequately understood through existing quantitative and broad-scale analyses.

Specifically, in the secondary school under study, the dropout phenomenon has persisted across multiple school years, significantly affecting the TVL strand both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. School data reveal fluctuations in dropout rates, averaging 6.70%, with particularly high dropout incidents among female students in certain periods[16]. Economic hardships, challenging family dynamics, academic struggles, and mental health issues have been identified as general contributing factors[17, 18]. These findings suggest that while aggregate data highlight general trends, the deeper personal and community-level experiences and challenges of individual students remain largely unexplored. However, such aggregated data and generalised factors often obscure the personal stories, individual decision-making processes, and specific lived contexts of the students at risk. There remains an evident gap in comprehensively understanding the deeper, personal narratives that explain why SARDO cases persist despite existing government, private, and school-based interventions.

Given the identified gap, this study adopts narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences, personal and professional struggles, and in-depth perspectives of the guidance counsellor and head teacher for the TVL strand at a school under study. Narrative inquiry provides a qualitative

methodological framework capable of capturing rich, detailed accounts that quantitative data or general qualitative summaries cannot adequately convey[19]. This approach prioritises personal stories as central data sources, illuminating the specific social, economic, emotional, and academic experiences contributing to dropout risks within this localised context. Through narrative inquiry, the study seeks to understand the complexity of SARDOs' experiences more deeply and holistically, thereby revealing insights otherwise overlooked by broader-scale analyses.

Ultimately, by understanding the personal narratives of the Head Teacher in the TVL strand and the school's Guidance Counsellor at a school under study, this study aims to uncover detailed perspectives and narrate contextualised aspects that shape students at risk of dropping out of school. The findings from this narrative inquiry will provide educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders with an enriched understanding of students' lived realities, informing more targeted and empathetic interventions. Thus, this research will contribute meaningfully to closing existing research gaps by offering a deeper, story-centred perspective on the persistent SARDO phenomenon, enabling more effective and contextually sensitive approaches to student retention.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by two well-established theoretical frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the layered and interconnected systems that influence a child's development—from immediate settings like the family and school (microsystem) to larger contexts such as community, policy, and societal values (macrosystem)[20]. In parallel, Self-Determination Theory asserts that human motivation is shaped by the fulfilment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness[21]. According to Deci and Ryan, when these needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to demonstrate persistence, well-being, and engagement in meaningful activities, including education.

These frameworks guided the exploration of the factors contributing to the persistence of SARDOs in the TVL strand at a large secondary high school in Northern Bukidnon. Bronfenbrenner's model provides a holistic lens to examine how different environmental systems—home conditions, school support, community structures, and institutional policies—interact to either support or hinder student retention. Simultaneously, SDT complements this analysis by looking into the internal experiences of the students, emphasising how a sense of agency, capability, and belonging can influence their motivation to stay in school. Together, these theories allow the study to capture both the external and internal forces shaping the SARDO phenomenon, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges and support mechanisms that matter most.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Data Collection and Analysis Through a Narrative Lens***

Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, I engaged the Guidance Counsellor (PGC) and the Head Teacher (PHT) in reflective conversations guided by narrative inquiry. Their accounts were shaped by experience and emotion, not just information. These stories, thematically analysed and restored, revealed a complex interplay of systemic and

personal factors[19]. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, the narratives exposed the external and internal dynamics of student disengagement, forming the crux of this narrative case.

### ***Setting of the Scene***

Tucked amid the highlands of Northern Bukidnon, a large secondary high school stands not just as an academic institution but as a silent witness to the persistent struggle of keeping learners in school. The TVL strand, designed to prepare students with practical skills for livelihood and employment, faces a shadow that dims its promise: the phenomenon of SARDOs. Through the reflective narratives of two dedicated educators—the Guidance Counsellor (PGC) and the Head Teacher (PHT)—a deeper understanding of SARDOs comes into focus. Their stories reveal not just statistics, but human experiences filled with hardship, effort, and glimpses of hope.

### ***Understanding Through Conversations***

The accounts were drawn from in-depth interviews where the educators shared not only their professional insights but also their emotional proximity to the students' plight. These conversations, shaped through the narrative inquiry lens, exposed recurring themes that echo systemic realities and personal battles. The data, analysed thematically [22], uncover how external environments, internal motivations, and support structures intersect in shaping the lives of at-risk learners.

### ***Participant Profiles***

This narrative analysis draws on the lived experiences and insights of two pillars of educational figures at a large secondary high school in Northern Bukidnon, each possessing distinct roles and perspectives. The first participant, referred to as the Guidance Counsellor (PGC), is a 37-year-old male educator who has been teaching for seven years, three of which were specifically spent as a guidance counsellor. With an academic background in psychology, he brings into his role an in-depth understanding of students' behavioural patterns and emotional needs. His day-to-day encounters revolve primarily around providing psychosocial support, academic counselling, and overseeing student welfare programs.

The second participant, the Head Teacher (PHT), is a seasoned educator—a 56-year-old female with extensive experience spanning 30 years in teaching and 13 years in educational administration. Her expertise is grounded not only in educational management (holding a Master's degree in Educational Management) but also in navigating the complex landscape of school operations, from resource management and policy implementation to strategic collaboration with community stakeholders. Her narratives reflect an administrative yet deeply empathetic view of the persistent dropout issue.

### **KEY FINDINGS AND EMERGENT THEMES**

#### ***Theme 1: Economic Struggles and the Weight of Poverty***

*"Even coming to school is already a challenge."* – PHT

*"We cannot fully support their financial needs because we, too, have our limits."* – PGC

The first and most piercing thread running through their narratives is the burden of poverty. Many students walk long distances just to attend class, often arriving tired and hungry. For some, the rising cost of daily fare is enough to keep them

home. The geographical and financial barriers form a heavy load that students carry silently, and it is not just the absence of money—it is the erosion of energy, will, and hope. Within Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, these are external factors like transportation and community poverty that inhibit access to school. Emotionally, they weigh down students, diminishing the internal motivation to persist.

**Theme 2: Gaps in Resources and the Quiet Shame of Inadequacy**

*"Students feel ashamed and just stop coming when they realise they can't participate."* – PHT

Material deprivation translates into emotional withdrawal. In a strand like TVL, where technical tools and practice-based learning are central, students who cannot afford the needed materials often feel marginalised. The Head Teacher shares how students disengage not out of rebellion, but out of embarrassment—a quiet resignation in the face of institutional scarcity. SDT's component of competence is violated here, as students are denied the tools that allow them to feel capable and included. For them, the absence of resources becomes a mirror reflecting inadequacy.

**Theme 3: Responsive Structures and Institutional Support**

*"We must understand the reasons behind their behaviour."* – PGC

Amidst these adversities, both educators tell of structured efforts to respond with compassion. Home visitations, remedial classes, and counselling services are not just school initiatives; they are acts of empathy. These interventions act as *scaffolding*—fragile, yes, but essential. The Guidance Counsellor emphasises the need to know the story behind the behaviour, a reminder that dropout is not a decision made lightly, but a last resort. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's

mesosystem, where the interaction between school and family becomes a site of healing. It also touches the SDT's tenet of relatedness, reinforcing the need for connection and care.

**Theme 4: Strengthening the Circle: Family and Community Partnerships**

*"Understanding family situations through direct conversations is crucial."* – PHT

Dropout prevention, they affirm, is not the school's burden alone. The Head Teacher shares experiences of conducting parent meetings, while the Guidance Counsellor notes how LGUs and barangay leaders step in to assist. These collaborations are not symbolic—they are strategic. The entire exosystem, as Bronfenbrenner suggests, must be engaged to address a student's reality. When community members become co-advocates, the narrative shifts from individual struggle to collective responsibility.

**Theme 5: Autonomy, Competence, and the Power of Motivation**

*"When students feel important through responsibility, their engagement improves significantly."* – PHT

*"Public acknowledgement during school expos transforms self-perception."* – PGC

Finally, the story takes a hopeful turn through initiatives that uplift student identity. From school expos that recognise skill, to livelihood projects that empower autonomy, students begin to see themselves not as dropouts-in-waiting but as competent individuals with purpose. This reflects the heart of Self-Determination Theory—where autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be nurtured to sustain internal motivation. When students feel they are seen, heard, and valued, the desire to remain in school is rekindled.

**Table 1. Narratives, Codes, Categories, and Themes of the Study**

Narratives	Codes	Categories	Themes
PHT: "Even coming to school is already a challenge."	Remote location, daily fatigue, travel hardship	Geographic and Transport Barriers	Theme 1: Economic Struggles and the Weight of Poverty
PGC: "We cannot fully support their financial needs because we, too, have our limits."	Economic limitation, counsellor helplessness	Daily Financial Burdens	
PHT: "Students feel ashamed and just stop coming when they realise they can't participate."	Material deprivation, silent withdrawal	Lack of Materials and Tools	Theme 2: Gaps in Resources and the Quiet Shame of Inadequacy
PGC: Material unavailability leads to shame, eroding self-worth.	Disengagement from embarrassment	Emotional Impact of Resource Scarcity	
PGC: "We must understand the reasons behind their behaviour."	Empathy-based intervention	Home Visitation and Care	Theme 3: Responsive Structures and Institutional Support
PHT: <i>Remediation Programs</i> provide fragile but vital scaffolding.	Academic reengagement, psychosocial support	Remediation and Guidance Support	
PHT: "Understanding family situations through direct conversations is crucial."	Dialogue, shared support	Parent-School Engagement	Theme 4: Strengthening the Circle: Family and Community Partnerships
PGC: Describes mental health and welfare programs from local officials.	Community alignment, local intervention	Barangay and LGU Involvement	
PHT: "When students feel important through responsibility, their engagement improves."	Role-based motivation, identity building	Student Choice and Leadership	Theme 5: Autonomy, Competence, and the Power of Motivation
PGC: "Public acknowledgement during school expos transforms self-perception."	Confidence from visibility, a motivation boost	Recognition of Skills and Self-Worth	
PHT: Mentions projects like rag-making and product-selling.	Autonomy, economic empowerment	School-Led Livelihood Initiatives	

### ***Interpreting the Meaning Behind the Stories***

The narratives reflect more than surface-level challenges—they reveal systemic gaps, socio-emotional disconnection, and unaddressed intersections of poverty and identity. This agrees to the reports of Beduya[18] and Ruiz et al. [3]. However, within these stories lies also a narrative of resistance, where teachers act as advocates, families as allies, and students as active agents in their own persistence. Bronfenbrenner's systems emerge not just as theoretical frames but as lived realities, while Deci and Ryan's constructs of intrinsic motivation, when nurtured, become protective shields against dropout.

### ***Toward a Deeper Understanding of the SARDO Phenomenon***

The stories shared by the Guidance Counsellor and Head Teacher illuminate the layered and deeply personal dimensions of SARDOs in a large secondary high school in Northern Bukidnon. More than data points, these are lived realities that demand an equally humanised response. Their stories do not merely describe problems—they suggest possibilities. Narrative inquiry, in this case, becomes not only a method but a moral imperative, giving voice to those who work at the margins of hope, helping to carry the weight of students who are at risk of giving up.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived narratives of the Guidance Counsellor and Head Teacher of the school under study to understand the challenges and support mechanisms surrounding SARDOs in the TVL strand. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, the findings revealed how economic hardship, inadequate school resources, and geographic isolation compound the dropout risks, while institutional efforts, community partnerships, and motivational strategies offer meaningful counterforces. These stories underscore the complexity of the SARDO phenomenon and the importance of humanising interventions that not only address systemic gaps but also nurture students' autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, it is recommended that educators and school administrators strengthen proactive interventions such as home visitation, remedial instruction, counselling services, and livelihood programs. These practices may be reinforced with strong linkages between the school and local government units to support financially struggling students. Teachers can also integrate student leadership opportunities and skill-based recognition programs to enhance motivation and engagement. Parents, on the other hand, are encouraged to maintain consistent communication with teachers and provide emotional and moral support to their children. Students themselves are called to take part in decision-making and school-based projects that build their confidence and sense of purpose in completing their education.

Given that this study is limited to two participants from a single public school, the results may not be generalizable across other contexts. Thus, future researchers may consider

examining the themes identified in this narrative inquiry, such as economic hardship, institutional gaps, and motivation, as variables in a larger-scale quantitative study. Moreover, additional research may be conducted with a wider and more diverse set of participants, including other school heads, guidance counsellors, SARDO students, and parents, to broaden the understanding and applicability of the findings.

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