Experiences of Teachers Teaching in Far-Flung Areas of Division of Davao Del Norte: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of teachers in remote parts of the Philippines' Davao Del Norte Division are examined in this phenomenological study. This study used the phenomenological qualitative method to describe the experiences of teachers in remote places in order to learn about their lived experiences, obstacles, and coping mechanisms. In this study, three key themes emerge from teacher interviews conducted in Talaingod, Langilan, and Kapalong West districts: teachers' unique experiences in distant areas, their coping strategies, and the perceptive observations they provide about their positions. The results show that teachers deal with different challenges, including poor resources, armed organizations, and social isolation in addition to language hurdles and logistical challenges. Teachers show resiliency in the face of these difficulties by employing the community's and their coworkers' support, modifying their pedagogical approaches, and harnessing repurposed resources and community initiatives to upgrade school infrastructure. To support teachers and students in remote places, the study emphasizes the significance of hiring local teachers, improving infrastructure, and advancing technology. To improve the quality of education in remote areas, it is advised to set up mentorship programs, guarantee the safety of teachers, expand resources, and offer linguistic and cultural training. This study adds to our understanding of how rural education affects teachers and provides useful information for practice and policy in related settings.

Keywords: Rural education, teacher experiences, coping mechanisms, phenomenological study, Davao Del Norte, remote schools, teacher resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The Division of Davao Del Norte is home to a large number of schools, many of which are situated in remote areas, including hilly areas. The majority of the experiences of teachers in their assigned area struggle to teach because of a lack of resources, accessibility issues, and inadequate macro skills. The teaching experiences are not one-size-fits-all; instead, every teacher faces unique challenges that they must overcome to provide their pupils with a well-rounded education. Experience is essential for our day-to-day existence. We all encounter life's progressions as employed professional teachers, and we cope with life's experiences in unique ways. Education has long been considered the most powerful instrument for improving the world.

Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) categorized public schools in South Africa's rural areas according to several

criteria that have a detrimental effect on the delivery of high-quality education. Generally, rural areas are isolated and underdeveloped. The Philippines' distant schools continue to struggle to offer basic education of high quality because of a lack of resources. Moreover, teachers who are passionate about their work and are dedicated to providing high-quality public services are needed at this rural school. Additionally, there are ongoing issues with Philippine education in a variety of learning environments, including a lack of trained teachers in the public school system, and a paucity of textbooks, facilities, and classrooms (Sun. Star Pampanga, 2017). The Philippines has 0.9% school accessibility among the lowest globally. The Philippine government is working to ensure that all barangays have access to schools. Remote schools frequently lack essential resources (Figueroa et al., 2016; Philrights.Org, 2016) and their teachers frequently experience a variety of stressors that can impair their effectiveness (Hartney, 2016; Rabago Mingoa, 2017).

Teachers in remote public schools have a variety of living experiences. In the Division of Davao Del Norte, approximately 40% of teachers in remote schools were teaching in far-flung areas, specifically in Talaingod District, Langilan District, and Kapalong West District. In remote indigenous school areas, most of the teachers are recent graduates or novices. Since they are accustomed to living in cities, it is unlikely that they have any experience in remote areas, (Young, K. D., Grainger, P., & James, D. (2018). These teachers may wish to move to different schools in the lowlands. Their motivation for doing so may be linked to their actual experiences at the places of employment where they were assigned. Experiences are essential to our day-to-day existence. We all have life progressions as employed professional educators, and everybody handles their life situations differently. Teachers assigned in remote areas battle with anxiety, setbacks, tension, a lack of self-assurance, a sense of unfulfillment, dependence, and the inability to manage the circumstances in their everyday lives.

Even if nobody can overcome these obstacles and experiences, they can also spur improvement to prepare for the potential growth in one's understanding of one's career opportunities as well as in their cognitive, spiritual, social, and personal domain trials (Bilbao, 2012). While existing studies provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of rural education, there appears to be a significant gap in understanding teachers' lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and adaptive strategies in the far-flung areas of Davao Del Norte. Specifically, there are limitations to the study that explore the depth of personal and professional experiences of teachers in far-flung areas, investigate the specific strategies and innovations teachers develop to overcome the unique challenges of teaching in remote areas, including how they manage resource limitations, engage with the community, and adapt their teaching methods to suit their students' needs. This study aimed to know the experiences of teachers teaching in far-flung areas on teachers' professional identities, career trajectories, and perspectives on the teaching profession, contributing to a broader understanding of the impact of rural education on educators.

Addressing this research gap is crucial for several reasons. First, it can provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of teaching in remote areas, which is essential for developing targeted policies and support systems for teachers in these contexts. Second, it highlights the resilience, creativity, and dedication of teachers working under challenging conditions, offering valuable lessons for teacher education and professional development programs. Finally, by focusing on a specific region such as Davao del Norte, this study can contribute to a more localized understanding of rural education, facilitating the development of region-specific interventions and support mechanisms.

Research Objectives

This study aims to describe the experiences of teachers assigned to far-flung schools in the Division of Davao Del Norte:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers teaching in far-flung areas?

2. How did teachers cope with their experiences teaching in far-flung areas?

3. What are the helpful insights shared by teachers teaching in far-flung areas?

Theoretical Lens

Based on McClelland's (1985) theory of requirements, there is a need of achievement hypothesis, which holds that a person's unique demands and life experiences gradually necessitate it. Those who are motivated by the need to succeed typically have a great desire to establish and meet difficult goals. They always value feedback on their work and would prefer to operate in a setting that is results-oriented. Achievers avoid both high-risk and low-risk circumstances by taking calculated risks to accomplish their objectives. They frequently favor working alone. This personality type is founded on the idea that achievements at work should be the main basis for a hierarchical organization.

This study is also anchored to self-efficacy theory of Bandura (1997). This relates to people's capacities to exercise control over the factors influencing their lives. This affects one's life decisions, motivation level, ability to overcome hardship, and susceptibility to stress and despair. He describes the beneficial effects of self-efficacy on all aspect of the human experience. The secret to being great is to approach life with constant effort and to experiment with attainable but difficult objectives. Simple success with little work might cause us to anticipate quick outcomes, which can then cause us to become quickly disheartened by failure. He went on to say that mastery experiences are the best means of developing a strong sense of effectiveness. People become discouraged easily because they anticipate instant gratification and have easy success. It takes experience conquering challenges with persistent effort to develop a robust sense of efficacy. In human endeavors, there are times when obstacles and misfortunes are beneficial since they teach us that perseverance is often necessary for achievement. People have what it takes to achieve once they've been convinced. They don't give up in the face of difficulty and bounce back from losses fast. They become stronger from adversity by persevering through challenging circumstances.

Rural and distant learning environments are undoubtedly beneficial and difficult. The province's rural sections are primarily suffering during this difficult time. The rural areas have always managed to survive despite severe economic difficulties. Every day, a great deal of remote educators battles to deliver high-quality education in besieged communities. There's no denying that a lot of people overlook this circumstance and how it affects education and training in a province, which puts us in danger. Therefore, in order to walk the path of becoming a successful teacher, each person must share their unique experiences as well as their professional development journey. Teaching strategies, coping mechanisms and insights should be a source of information, values, and good attitudes for educators working in remote schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. The phenomenological design describes the interpretations of the participants from their experiences. According to Burns & Grove (2007), qualitative research is more closely related to words, language, and experiences than it is to measurements, statistics, and numbers. Inductive, holistic, epic, subjective, and process-oriented methodologies used to comprehend, interpret, characterize, and formulate a theory about phenomena or environment are referred to as qualitative research methods. Furthermore, in order to gather information on the actual experiences of the teachers teaching in the far-flung area, a phenomenological technique was chosen for this study. The research methodology would contribute to a deeper comprehension of the nature and significance of ordinary events. Interviews are an in-depth strategy that can provide access to profound knowledge and

explanations and aid in the conduct of phenomenological research, according to Corbetta (2003).In addition, Bryman (2008), subjective and in-depth personal stories can be communicated through interviews or in-person talks, with an emphasis on the interviewee's comprehension and explanation of various phenomena.

Population Sample

The participants of this study were the officially assigned teachers in the far-flung areas of Davao Del Norte Division, particularly in Talaingod District, Talaingon District, and Kapalong West District. These were the teachers who have been working in the area for at least three years in the service. Only seven (7) teachers elementary and high school who comprised the study's research participants. Participants of this study were teachers assigned to Tibucag Integrated School (5), Kapatagan Integrated School (1) and Malapanit Primary School (1). The researchers used purposive sampling to select the participants. It is widely used and popular in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990). The purpose of this study was to examine homogenous sampling, a purposive sampling strategy that allows researchers to get opinions from a wide range of sources about a topic of interest. When conducting qualitative research and looking for informants with the most in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, this sampling technique is appropriate (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection Procedure

This study employed the data collection by Creswell (2008), obtaining permission to conduct the study, selecting participants and cites purposefully to best understand the phenomenon, identifying data from various sources, administering and recording data using protocols, such as observational and interview protocols, and administering the data collection in a manner sensitive to individuals and sites. Through in-depth interviews with the participants, the researcher obtained the essential data, from which a semi-structured interview guide was developed. Additionally, the researchers visited the participants' school assignments in person and requested permission from the head of the school to carry out the study. To give the in-depth interview greater credibility, the researchers requested the participants' permission to record it on audiotape.

Purposive sampling was employed by the researchers to choose study participants for in-depth interviews. Purposeful sampling is a widely used technique in qualitative research to identify and select arguments that are rich in information in order to maximize the utilization of available resources (Patton, 2002). In order to do this, people or groups of people who are particularly aware or experienced with a topic of interest must be identified and chosen (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Bernard (2002) highlighted the significance of availability, willingness to participate, and the capacity to articulately, expressively, and reflectively share views and viewpoints in addition to knowledge and experience.

In order to protect and respect the participants as well as the integrity of the research, ethical considerations are crucial while conducting a study on teachers working in distant or isolated locations. The individuals' involvement in the study is completely voluntary. Only the research team have secured access to personally identifiable information. The participants' cultural customs and values were honored. The goal of the study is to minimize participant risks and burdens while optimizing potential benefits. The goal of this study's findings is to offer information that could enhance remote learning environments' educational policies and practices. The researchers made an effort to minimize any potential discomfort or inconvenience that participants may have experienced. Participants were selected fairly and without bias. The researchers ensured that the selection criteria were justifiable and that no vulnerable populations were exploited. The benefits and burdens of the research were distributed equitably, and we were transparent about how the findings would be used and who would benefit from the research. The researchers pledge to report the research findings with honesty and integrity. All findings will be truthfully presented, with limits and possible biases pointed out. In addition to receiving contact details for any further queries or issues,

participants will have access to the study's findings if they so want.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Colaizzi method of data analysis was employed in this study. With the use of this method, the researchers were able to analyze qualitative study data, find relevant material, and categorize it into themes. The method adheres to data analysis processes. Open-ended questions or loosely organized interviews were utilized in qualitative research to find out what people were thinking and feeling in particular circumstances (Shosha, 2012). Utilizing Colaizzi's stages, the researchers examine the information gathered during the In-Depth Interview. As researchers, we read a description of every study participant in order to understand their perceptions. Subsequently, the researchers extracted descriptions and other remarks that were relevant to the research subject. Researchers must become articulate and meticulous in examining the meanings of the relevant statements in order to derive themes from the meanings. Researchers created themes by organizing related categories into groups. Finally, the results of the study on the experiences of public school teachers in far-flung areas were combined by the researchers into a thorough description of the subject and sent back to each participant for confirmation.
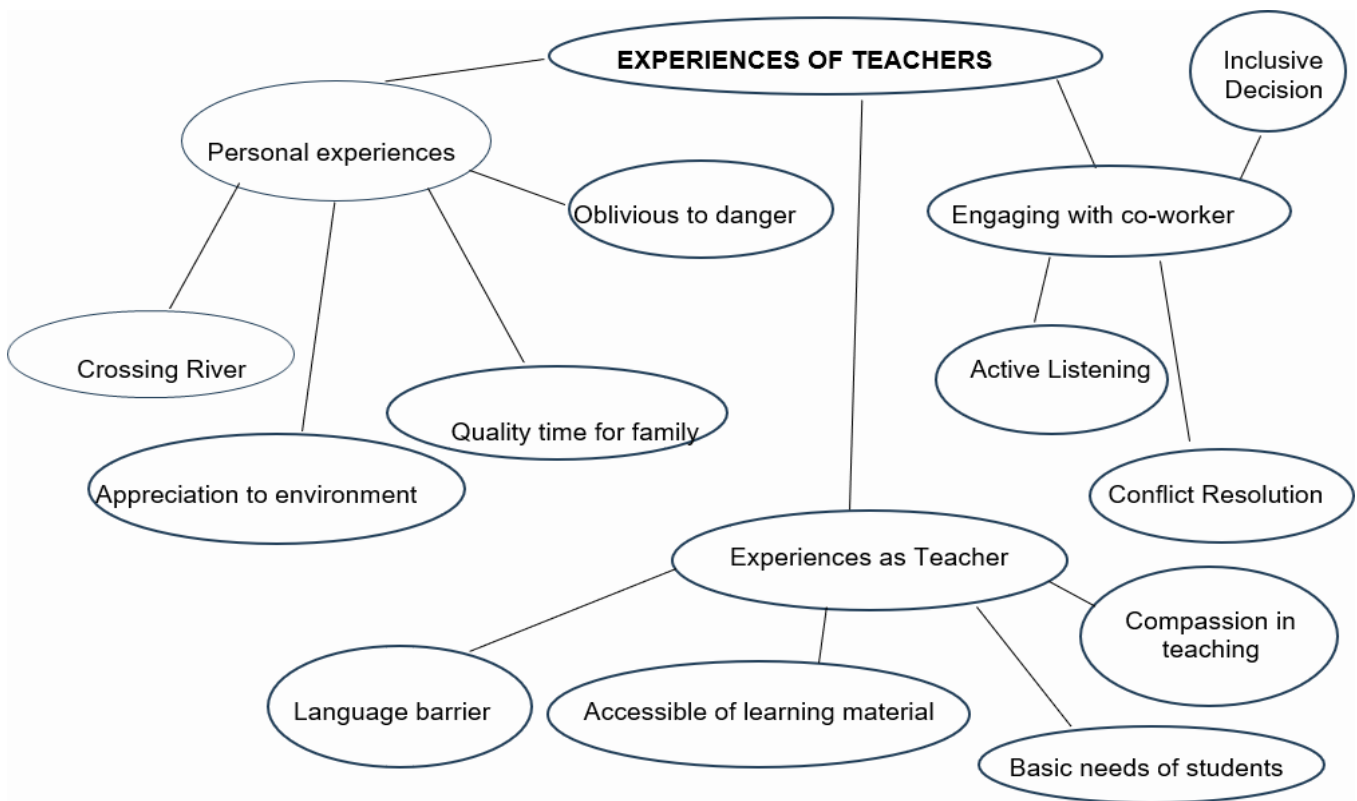

Figure 1. Experiences of Teachers in Far-Flung Areas

Responses from instructors in remote areas reveal that their experiences are distinct from their own, as well as those of their teachers and colleagues. This issue focuses on the difficulties and obstacles that instructors encounter in distant schools. The teachers expressed how uncomfortable it was for them to be apart from their families. One reason for the lack of workers in non-metropolitan areas is social isolation. Feelings of alienation or dislocation might result from living in two quite different contexts, Starr, K. & White, S. (2008)

Personal Experiences

"Being a teacher in a far-flung area, the experience is extraordinary. Sometimes, I need to cross two rivers, almost man-high, to get home to our family. Living with the fear of being caught between the NPA and AFP

is very visible; both groups have been visibly present. I have experienced several wars that didn't last long. However, last 2018 was the longest and most frightening crossfire. First, it was close to the school, and second, there were children around. It lasted for 2 hours, and we were afraid we might not be able to go home. But thank God, we were all safe. Now, they are not as visible." (P1)

"Teaching in a far-flung area is tremendously difficult. I experienced a roller coaster of mixed emotions. It is very hard to live with your family especially when you have small children. When the distance does not permit you to go home after work, for me it's like that I am drained throughout the week. Dealing and living with almost 20 people who are not related to you other than workmates, is a challenging one". (P2)

"It's very beautiful because you get to experience the coolness of the surroundings, especially since there are still many trees. It's also a bit challenging."(P3)

"Personally, at first it's hard to be far from my family and not be able to come home every day but as time goes by, I have learned to deal with it and have already adjusted over" (P5)

"In my first year of teaching in a far-flung area, I might find it quite far. It's far because it entails walking for hours and crossing rivers while carrying your daily supplies. it also quite challenging." (P7)

Teachers deal with comparable issues daily. In the course of their service, they have also been involved in situations that may have been fatal. Rather than concentrating on teaching and transferring knowledge to pupils, they are constantly overburdened with reports, loads of work, and given responsibilities that clamor for top-notch instruction. In addition, to effectively instruct and engage with the students and the community, teachers sent to remote areas and those who are unfamiliar with the language must be aware of the cultural norms, beliefs, and practices of the community, Sriram, Y. (2021)

Experience as Teacher

"The language barrier is there because my students are 100% Manobo and in grade 1, they don't understand Bisaya yet, so we have difficulty understanding each other. I struggle to teach because they lack hygiene. As long as the students can attend school, especially the grade 1 students who haven't took a bath and haven't changed clothes, but gradually, they also come to understand. It's very hard to teach when the surroundings aren't pleasant, I keep coughing and getting colds, but I've gotten used to it. And slowly, they also come to understand proper hygiene."(P1)

"The first face-to-face classes were also hard due to language differences, and learning materials were not that accessible. Contextualization can be tough considering their varied culture, beliefs, and sometimes their own experiences". (P2)

"Being a teacher in a rural community, especially an IP community I can say that necessities such as food can be a major factor for the learners, especially when their homes are very far from the school and they have nothing to eat to survive a day in school" (P5)

"I discovered my love and passion in teaching. Especially to the indigenous children in far-flung areas"(P6)

"As a teacher, when I first encountered the area and my pupils, I was shocked because, they have used different language in which as a first-time teacher, you will find difficult to understand what they are saying " (P7)

Collins (1992) states that communication in education is the exchange of ideas, sentiments, intentions, expectations, perceptions, or orders between two or more people through speech, writing, gestures, and

other media. The author went on to explain that a statement serves the function of facilitating a planned conversation between the students and the teachers, which is an essential component of the classroom communication process. This implies that a teacher's preferred method of instruction might not be the best option for another.

Engaging with co-workers

"Well, I don't have a problem with my coworker; we understand each other. Sometimes, friction is inevitable, but it gets solved right away because we're just like siblings. We share our problems and help each other out, whether it's about money or personal matters. In terms of work, we help each other so that the work gets done faster."(P1)

"My companions are very good because we treat each other like family. We help each other with tasks."(P3)

"*When teaching in a far-flung community, since teachers can't go home every day, teachers live in the same place for the weekdays thus a strong bond is built within each other*" (P5)

"I learned to be more patient, friendly, and respectful to my co-workers" (P6)

"With my coworkers, sometimes we have some misunderstanding but usually as a teacher we need to understand each other for the student's sake and the development of our school" (P7)

According to Jochems, Kirschner, and Kreijns (2012), social interaction plays a crucial role in creating a social space where a structure encompassing social relationships, group cohesion, trust, and belonging can be found. These elements all work together to foster social negotiation, open communication, critical thinking, and supportive interactions.
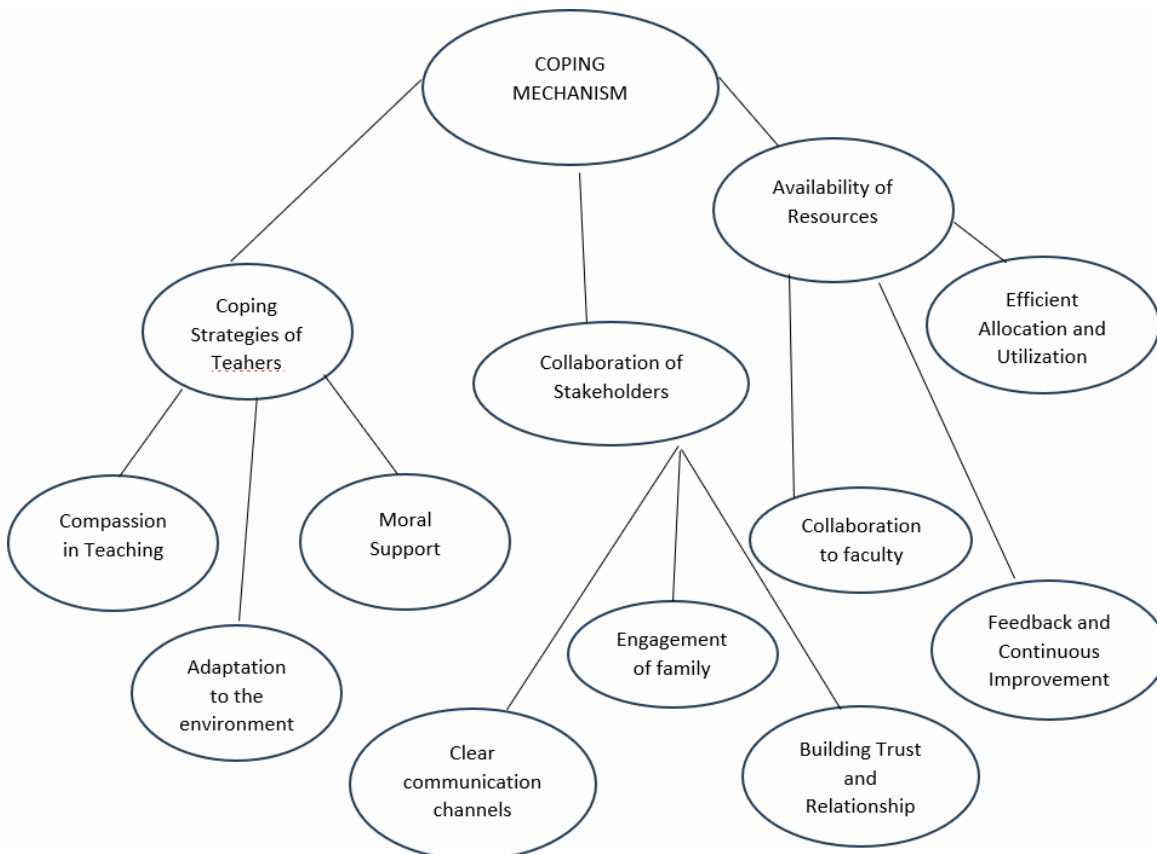

Figure 2. Coping Mechanism of Teachers in Far-Flung Areas

Being a teacher in a remote and distant place requires perseverance and ingenuity. Teachers place a high value on establishing a robust support system in the community, working closely with other educators, and involving local stakeholders. This is consistent with Jones et al. (2018), who highlighted the value of community collaborations in distance learning settings. The responses of the participants show how they cope as they are assigned in a far-flung area, how they face challenges, how they handle stakeholders in the community, and how they find solutions for facilities and resources.

Coping Strategies of Teachers

"Prayer, my family, and my positive coworker. When we talk about our experiences, we can laugh about it. It's also nice to have someone with you who is very positive and has a good outlook on life, not someone with a toxic mindset."(P1)

"You need to adapt and accept the environment" (P4)

"*Coping strategies vary from each teacher to another, I make myself busy by doing different things to distract myself that I am away from home"* (P5)

"*I survived those years of experiences because of my love and passion in teaching children. That's my coping strategy to face all challenges*" (P6)

"As a teacher, in a far-flung area, we need the support of our co-teachers, administrators also in the community to share the problem and ask for some solutions to what we problems encounter (P7)

Collaboration of Stakeholders and community

"At first, I really struggled to communicate, especially with my parents, because not all of them understand Bisaya. So, I ask for help from a parent to explain what I want to say to them." (P1)

"*Be good to them and treat them with kindness*". (P2)

"Talk to them and befriend them as much as possible." (P3)

"Respecting their culture and personal ideas" (P5)

"Ask for financial support from the barangay office. To support school materials and supplies. (P6)

Russell et al. (2017), a distant educator in northern territory, define cultural competence as the capacity to recognize and honor culturally distinct values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as well as to take these variations into account and react accordingly. Developing relationships with local adults and children is one method to become culturally competent.

Availability of facilities and resources

"*Ask my IP co-teacher to understand them more and widen our knowledge*" (P1)

"Reach out to other teachers and ask" (P2)

"Use recycled materials Conduct parents bayanihan and brigada eskwela. To make the facilities and sustainable resources in school" (P6)

"*Honestly, in our school, I can say that there is a lack of facilities, probably because of the distance and

because of the lack of proper roads and electricity" (P7)

According to Afework and Asfaw (2014), the unavailability of school facilities and instructional materials, both in quantity and quality, poses a significant challenge to teaching and learning activities. This also results in a negative impact on the improvement of education.
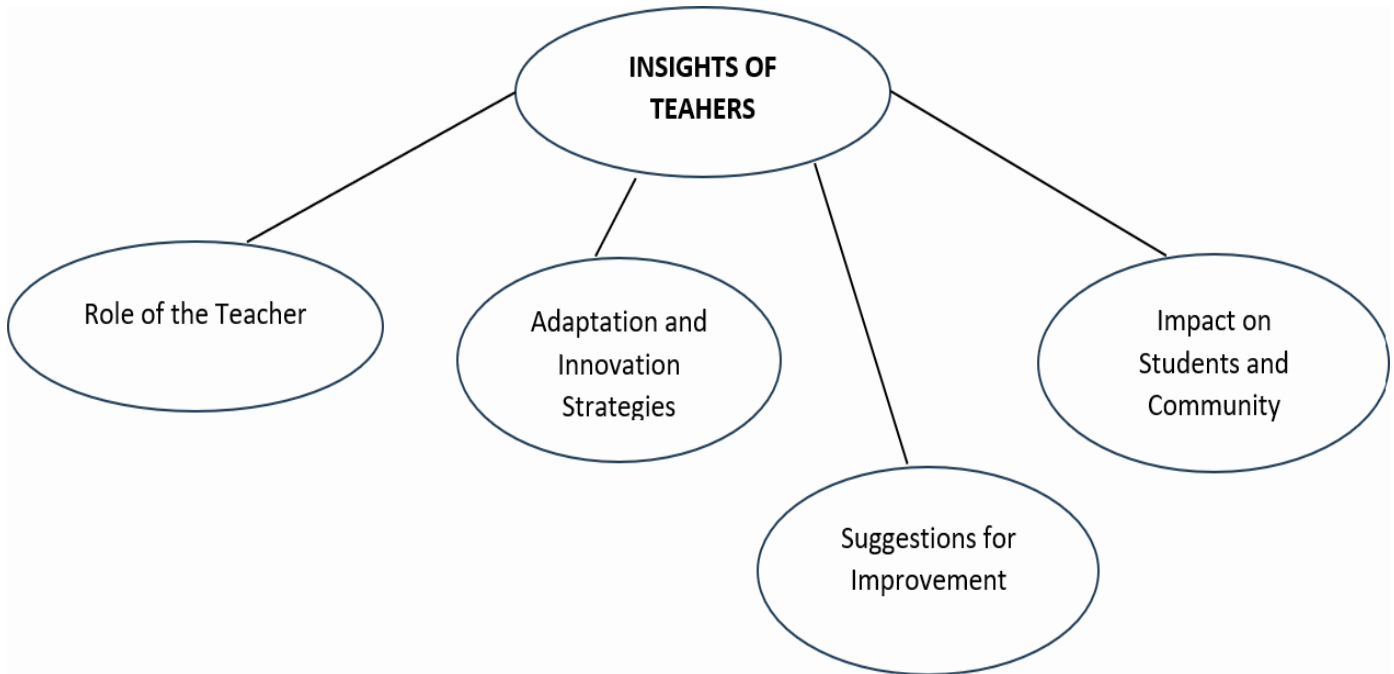

Figure 3. Insights of Teachers Teaching in Far-Flung Areas

By introducing the students to a world beyond their immediate surroundings, teachers in remote areas are playing an important role not only in raising knowledge but also shaping the future of young people." "The key to transforming the educational landscape of these regions is their commitment and innovation in dealing with barriers.

"Our learners from far-flung areas are very dependent on us teachers; their learning is limited. Technology will help them innovate and widen their knowledge to stay updated so they won't be left behind with new knowledge, and somehow our learners will know that the world is vast. That early marriage isn't the end of their life. That they can dream, they can travel abroad, and strive in their education." (P1)

"To hire teachers that are residents of the community, teachers whose family is within the area. I do believe that teachers who can be with their families are more mentally and emotionally stable than those who aren't. It has a great impact on teaching teaching-learning process of learners. I am not saying that I am not effective but maybe I can be more when I am at ease and at peace with my family who can give moral support to every endeavor". (P2)

"I hope the school could have more technology added." (P3)

"Must have an internet connection" (P4)

"Far-flung communities need Teachers that love their profession and love the idea of changing the students' lives by imparting to them the knowledge which we are tasked to do". (P5)

"I learned more techniques and strategies and enhanced my teaching and learning experiences to handle 3– 4-years-old children" (P6)

"Maybe, at the moment, they are constructing a road that the students can't walk on anymore, and there is ongoing electricity. I'm sure they won't be behind what's going on in the city, especially on social media" (P7)

According to Lariosa et. al., 2022 teachers in remote schools are faced with the challenge of working from their comfort zone and dealing with students and communities who have different cultural backgrounds. To survive and stay alive, they used a variety of adaptation strategies in far-flung areas. In far-flung areas, they were able to deal with and cope with different problems and challenges; they had become more resilient, brave, consistent, and determined to stay and teach their knowledge to the empty minds of their children.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and coping mechanisms of teachers assigned to far-flung areas. It identifies the distinct challenges they face, the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges, and their insights for improving the teaching-learning experience in remote locations.

The following is the summary of the important points gathered and analyzed based on the findings of the study:

1. Teachers in remote areas experience social isolation, language barriers, and logistical difficulties. The physical distance from family and the arduous travel conditions aggravate their sense of alienation and dislocation.
2. Teachers often face life-threatening situations due to the presence of leftist groups and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). They also contend with inadequate facilities, a lack of proper teaching materials, and a need to adapt to the local culture and language.
3. Teachers develop resilience through various coping strategies such as maintaining a positive outlook, relying on support from co-workers and the community, and finding strength in their passion for teaching. They also adapt their teaching methods to align with the cultural context and resources available.
4. Strong bonds with co-workers and the local community are crucial. Social interaction fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support which is essential for mental and emotional well-being.
5. Teachers utilize recycled materials, conduct community-based initiatives like "Brigada Eskwela," and seek support from local stakeholders to address resource shortages and improve school facilities.
6. To enhance the teaching-learning experience, the study suggests employing local teachers who can stay with their families, increasing technological resources, and ensuring better infrastructure. These improvements can help remote students stay connected and motivated to pursue their education.

Based on the summarized findings of the study, the researchers recommended the following:

1. The Department of Education, Division office may establish mentorship and support programs that connect teachers in remote areas with their peers in more accessible regions. This could be facilitated through online platforms, offering a space for teachers to share experiences, resources, and coping strategies.
2. The school may collaborate with local government units (LGUs) and security forces to ensure the safety of teachers from threats posed by armed groups. This could include providing secure housing, safe transportation options, and emergency response training.
3. Increase funding and resources for schools in remote areas to ensure they have adequate teaching materials, facilities, and access to technology. This could involve partnerships with NGOs, private sector contributions, and government programs specifically targeted at enhancing rural education.

4. Implement comprehensive training programs for teachers that cover local languages and cultural practices. This would help new teachers integrate more effectively into their communities and improve their teaching effectiveness by allowing them to communicate more effectively with their students.

5. Prioritize the hiring of teachers from within the local community who are already familiar with the cultural and linguistic landscape. This could help alleviate some of the social isolation and logistical challenges faced by teachers from outside the area.

6. Invest in infrastructure improvements, including better roads to remote areas, reliable internet connections, and suitable living accommodations for teachers. This would help reduce the sense of isolation and make remote teaching positions more appealing.

7. Encourage and support the development of innovative teaching methods that are adaptable to the resources available in remote areas. This could include outdoor learning, community-based projects, and the use of locally sourced materials for teaching.

8. Strengthen community engagement in education by expanding initiatives like "Brigada Eskwela" and creating more opportunities for local stakeholders to contribute to the improvement of school facilities and resources.

9. Explore the use of technology to bridge the education gap in remote areas, such as satellite internet for online learning resources, and digital libraries, and train teachers to use educational apps and platforms effectively.

10. Advocate for policies that address the unique challenges of teaching in remote areas, including increased salaries or incentives, and special grants for teachers in remote schools, and more flexible curriculum guidelines that allow for cultural and adaptable.

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