

Challenges to the Professionalism of Teachers in Rural Sabah

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professional challenges faced by teachers serving in remote areas of Sabah, particularly in relation to instructional management and job satisfaction. The purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' daily teaching experiences and how they evaluate their job satisfaction in challenging environments. Notably, remote areas often struggle with inadequate infrastructure, including poor road access, limited school facilities, unstable electricity supply, and weak internet connectivity, which directly affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Concurrently, teachers face psychosocial challenges such as professional isolation, excessive workload, and limited opportunities for career development. This phenomenological study employed a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers from remote schools. The findings indicate that teachers adapt their instructional practices creatively by utilizing available resources, drawing support from colleagues, and tailoring strategies to students' needs. Logistical constraints and workload pressures do not prevent teachers from experiencing professional satisfaction, which is driven by students' progress and positive social support. This study provides a comprehensive insights into the lived experiences of rural teachers and underscores the need for holistic support policies, encompassing professional development initiatives, enhanced physical infrastructure, and the enhancement of teacher well-being.

Keywords: Rural Teachers, Teacher Professionalism, Instructional Management, Job Satisfaction, Remote Schools

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professionalism encompasses competence, commitment, work ethic, and continuous career development. However, teachers in rural areas of Sabah face unique and complex challenges compared to their urban counterparts. Constraints such as limited teaching resources, inadequate school infrastructure, lack of access to professional training, and the diverse abilities of students in classrooms reflect a diverse educational reality (Amdan, Janius, Jasman, & Kasdiah, 2024). In such situations, teachers are required to have strong pedagogical skills and demonstrate creativity and self-efficacy in adapting teaching strategies to local conditions (Timbang & Ambotang, 2020).

Studies have discovered that rural teachers employ local knowledge professionally to enrich teaching and enhance students' critical thinking skills (Aziz, Habil, Jalaluddin, & Rashid, 2021). For instance, incorporating cultural and contextual elements of students' lives as learning media strengthens pedagogical interactions and fosters learner autonomy. This highlights that professionalism in rural settings extends beyond mere academic expertise. Rather, it also involves the ability to integrate local values into the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in Malaysian rural schools indicates that teachers value professional collaboration, as it supports both their learning process and career development. Nevertheless, rural teachers continue to face challenges such as limited time, negative attitudes from some educators, and financial constraints, which affect PLC effectiveness (Timbang & Ambotang, 2020).

Professional isolation is also identified as a key obstacle. The lack of professional support may heighten teachers' work-related stress, and this phenomenon is also evident in the Malaysian context (Aziz et al., 2021). In addition,

recent studies on digital education in rural Sabah schools reveal that teachers face challenges related to technology access, limited training, and weak technical support (Tan, Kaur, Malar, & Chong, 2025).

Despite these limitations, rural teachers demonstrate resilience and commitment to their profession. Intrinsic satisfaction, particularly when observing students mastering basic skills, serves as a strong motivator even in the absence of material rewards (Amdan et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the professional challenges of rural teachers is essential to designing holistic interventions that are contextually grounded and aimed at enhancing rural teachers' professional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Instructional Management

Instructional management encompasses planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the teaching and learning process. In the context of rural Sabah schools, these aspects are often hindered by infrastructural constraints, limited teaching materials, and heavy workloads.

Nevertheless, recent studies such as those by Amdan, Janius, Jasman, and Kasdiah (2024) demonstrated that rural teachers maintain professionalism through pedagogical flexibility and systematic classroom management, despite substandard school environments.

Furthermore, research by Othman et al. (2023) emphasized that resilience and pedagogical adaptation during the pandemic led to transformations in teaching and learning approaches, including the use of creative strategies despite physical and logistical challenges. Likewise, Mohamad (2025) underscored the significance of positive teacher-student relationships in building motivation and student engagement, especially in rural Sabah schools. This study also noted that teachers who incorporate local values and cultural elements into teaching are able to improve learner autonomy and achievement.

Collectively, these studies reaffirm that, despite physical and logistical constraints, rural teachers continue to demonstrate high-quality instructional management through:

1. - Careful planning,
2. - Effective classroom discipline,
3. - Continuous professional reflection,
4. - Flexible pedagogical strategies tailored to local contexts.

B. Job Satisfaction

Teacher job satisfaction is a key indicator of the effectiveness of the education system, particularly in rural and remote contexts. Correspondingly, teachers who are satisfied with their careers tend to demonstrate higher commitment, deliver more meaningful teaching, and maintain professional motivation despite numerous challenges. In rural schools, job satisfaction is not solely tied to material rewards. It also depends on factors such as administrative support, social relationships at work, and the ability to adapt to the school environment.

Hedzir, Mokhtar, and Abdul Razak (2024) stressed that teacher job satisfaction stems from multiple factors, including workload, career opportunities, and environmental stressors, necessitating holistic approaches to enhance teacher well-being. Meanwhile, Hashim, Mansor, and Yunus (2025) noted that primary school teachers' job satisfaction was high, with a low tendency for early retirement, suggesting a balance between professional commitment and work motivation.

Regarding workload, Ganisan, Nachiappan, and Appalanaidu (2025) reported a significant negative relationship between teacher workload and job satisfaction. This highlights that administrative support, fair task distribution, and a conducive work environment play a crucial role in maintaining teacher motivation. Consistently, Hashim et al. (2023) argued that positive school organizational climate and supportive leadership styles enhance teacher satisfaction and loyalty to the profession. Additionally, international meta-analyses indicate that teacher job satisfaction reduces attrition and improves teacher-student interactions, student motivation, and academic

achievement (Collie, Granziera, & Martin, 2023).

Overall, rural teachers' job satisfaction is influenced by both internal and external factors that are interrelated. Thus, a deeper understanding of these dimensions is essential to support teachers' holistic professional development, especially to ensure they remain motivated, resilient, and committed to educational responsibilities in rural and remote areas.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, which enabled the collection of contextual and in-depth data on the experiences of teachers in rural schools in Sabah. Seven teachers were purposively selected based on their experience teaching in rural areas, active involvement in instructional processes, and willingness to share personal insights. The selection of participants allowed for analysis across a range of perspectives and experiences, thereby enhancing the empirical depth of the study.

Data were collected through audio-recorded interviews and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising six phases: familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting of findings. Reflexivity and transparency were emphasised throughout the analytical process, with the researcher maintaining a reflective journal to record decisions regarding codes and theme development. Additional measures, including member checking and consultation with research peers, were applied to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

This methodological approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the realities of teaching in rural contexts, providing a robust analysis of instructional management challenges, job satisfaction, and teacher professionalism, while contributing to a deeper understanding of educational practice in rural settings.

FINDINGS

This study identifies various challenges and strategies employed by teachers in remote schools in Sabah in managing instruction and maintaining job satisfaction. The thematic analysis yielded two main themes: Teaching Management in Remote Schools and Teacher Job Satisfaction, with several sub-themes illustrating how teachers adapt their pedagogical approaches within infrastructural constraints and how they assess satisfaction with their profession.

1. Teaching Management in Remote Schools

1.1 Flexible Planning Based on Student Levels

Teachers used the curriculum documents (DSKP) and annual plans as guides but adapted teaching content according to students' capabilities. This flexible planning allowed teachers to accelerate or repeat topics to ensure concept mastery, reflecting pedagogical acumen and an in-depth understanding of students' varying levels.

"If a student quickly grasps a topic we are teaching, we can move forward..."

"Sometimes I spend a whole week just teaching prayer. Occasionally, I don't touch the textbook at all."

1.2 Access Constraints and Digital Learning Resources

The absence of internet access hindered the use of interactive multimedia such as YouTube, limiting teaching methods reliant on digital resources. These constraints emphasise the need for teachers to employ creative alternatives to achieve learning objectives.

"If we want to use the internet, there is no line... it's difficult..."

"...I asked them to go and collect small twigs... that works."

Alternative Strategies: Utilising Available Materials and Teacher Creativity

Teachers made use of pre-recorded materials on mobile phones and government laptops, simple materials such as coloured paper, and locally available natural resources to engage students. This approach demonstrates creativity and the ability to adapt teaching despite limited resources.

“We use whatever recordings we have already saved...”

“...if the materials aren’t available, I ask the students to find them.”

1.4 Peer Teaching to Manage Varied Student Levels

To address heterogeneous student levels, teachers employed a ‘peer teaching’ strategy, where more capable students assisted their peers. This enhanced the effectiveness of lessons and fostered collaborative learning.

“...that student acts as a peer teacher, helping others who are at a lower level...”

“...instead of a bored student sitting alone, they teach those who are struggling.”

1.5 Classroom Management and Student Preparedness

Teachers emphasised maintaining student focus after physical activities such as PE. Using engaging materials and behavioural management were crucial for smooth lesson delivery.

“...after PE, if we don’t capture their attention properly, we can’t expect them to listen...”

“...I managed to achieve my objectives in the class.”

1.6 Teacher Collaboration as Professional Support

Teachers relied on colleagues, particularly within the same subject panel, to discuss and exchange teaching ideas. These informal professional networks function as important support systems in remote schools.

“...we start within the same subject first, then move to other areas...”

“...I usually discuss with pre-school teachers...”

2. Teacher Job Satisfaction in Remote Schools

2.1 Satisfaction from Student Progress

Teachers derived satisfaction from observing both academic and personal development in students. Positive changes motivated teachers and provided a sense of professional accomplishment.

“...we see how they progress... eventually, they can master the Qur’an...”

“...I see these changes, and it makes me happy.”

2.2 Positive Work Environment and Social Support

Supportive colleagues and a safe, positive school environment significantly contributed to teacher well-being, even when facing physical challenges.

“...the working situation is good... colleagues are very supportive... positive...”

“...it’s inspiring to be surrounded by such supportive peers.”

2.3 Non-Teaching Workload and Staff Constraints

Teachers experienced pressure when required to undertake administrative duties and extra-curricular activities without sufficient staffing. This additional burden affected their time and focus on core teaching tasks.

“...administrative work... duties outside our field... it’s stressful...”

2.4 Social Relations and Recognition within the School Community

While teachers valued a culture of mutual assistance, such as the concept of *akou misompuru*, the lack of formal recognition for their contributions led to feelings of being undervalued, highlighting the importance of professional validation.

“Yes, in our school we practice *akou misompuru*.”

“The teachers’ club provides small rewards... it’s nice, less negativity.”

“...I arranged the table skirting... someone else received the credit... the other class looked nice and the teacher smiled...”

2.5 Substitute Teacher Constraints

The absence of substitute teachers disrupted lessons, particularly when teachers had to attend official duties, affecting the continuity of learning and leaving students without guidance.

“...all the teachers live off-site... no one replaces them or supervises after school...”

“...when teachers are frequently away, our students are neglected.”

2.6 Perspectives on Professional Development

Teachers expressed greater interest in improving teaching quality rather than administrative responsibilities, underscoring their commitment to their professional identity as educators.

“...I’m interested in improving my teaching... I remain a teacher first...”

“...as long as the school needs me, I will continue to serve.”

DISCUSSION

This discussion elaborates on the study’s findings in relation to the research questions, focusing on three main aspects: teachers’ experiences in managing teaching, job satisfaction while serving in rural schools, and the professional support required to address challenges. The study demonstrates that teachers in remote areas encounter issues demanding flexibility, emotional resilience, pedagogical creativity, and teaching management skills within tangible constraints. These findings are linked to relevant theories and prior research to deepen understanding of teacher professionalism in rural Sabah.

1. Teachers’ Experiences in Managing Teaching

Teachers in rural contexts manage teaching adaptively, adjusting content and instructional strategies according to students’ abilities and resource limitations. This flexibility allows them to accelerate or repeat topics to ensure conceptual mastery. Such strategies align with Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist principles, emphasising contextualised learning through social interaction.

The use of alternative materials such as stored recordings, natural resources, and coloured paper demonstrates teachers’ creativity in maintaining the continuity of teaching. Peer-teaching strategies exemplify effective collaborative approaches in heterogeneous classrooms, while classroom management and engaging materials

sustain student focus. Professional collaboration with colleagues also provides crucial support, allowing informal exchange of ideas and instructional strategies.

2. Teacher Job Satisfaction in Rural Schools

Teacher satisfaction is influenced by student achievement and social support. Student progress, including mastery of basic skills, provides significant emotional reward and motivation. This aligns with Herzberg's (1959) Two-Factor Theory, which highlights achievement and recognition as primary motivational factors.

Non-teaching duties and excessive administrative responsibilities reduce focus on core teaching tasks, consistent with Rahman et al. (2021). Nevertheless, a positive working environment and colleague support help sustain motivation, psychological well-being, and professional commitment. The lack of substitute teachers further challenges the continuity of teaching and after-school activities.

3. Professional Support Needed by Rural Teachers

Teachers emphasise the importance of structured support, including administrative recognition, access to relevant professional development, and formal collaboration. Although informal support networks exist, time constraints and shortages of specialised staff limit their effectiveness. Emotional support, ongoing professional training, and adequate physical facilities are crucial in reinforcing rural teacher professionalism and ensuring continuity of teaching and school activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that teachers serving in rural schools in Sabah face a range of challenges that directly impact instructional management and job satisfaction. Infrastructural constraints such as unstable internet access, limited teaching resources, and logistical difficulties require teachers to adapt pedagogical strategies creatively to meet the diverse needs of their students. Teachers consistently demonstrated a high level of commitment through initiatives including the use of personal resources, reorganisation of annual teaching plans, and collaboration with colleagues for professional support.

The findings also indicate that teachers derive a sense of satisfaction from student achievement, particularly in foundational skills, despite pressures arising from additional responsibilities and uneven recognition. Based on these findings, it is recommended that stakeholders prioritise the enhancement of basic infrastructure, provision of relevant teaching resources, and strategic placement of teachers according to their specialisation to improve instructional quality. Contextually appropriate professional development programmes, including training in multi-level teaching, time management, and teacher well-being, should be conducted regularly. Furthermore, attention to teacher welfare, such as improved housing facilities, special incentives, and formal recognition, is essential to enhance motivation and retain experienced teachers in rural areas. Understanding the realities of teachers in rural settings is crucial to ensure that education policies are inclusive, comprehensive, and sustainable, thereby supporting both effective teaching and professional well-being.

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