

Teaching Beyond Isolation: Lived Experiences, Resilience, and Adaptation of Teachers in Geographically Isolated Areas

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ABSTRACT

Teaching in geographically isolated areas presents unique professional, instructional, and emotional challenges that influence teachers' resilience, adaptation, and well-being. This study explored the lived experiences of teachers assigned to Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes in Sitio Kapihan, Socorro, Surigao del Norte. Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry with 18 teachers and 1 school administrator, selected through complete enumeration. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis revealed three major themes influencing resilience and burnout: Institutional Neglect and Structural Disadvantage, Workload Intensification and Role Expansion, and Institutional Isolation and Limited Professional Support. Findings further showed that teachers' lived experiences shaped instructional practices through Learner-Centered Adaptation and Empathy, Experience-Driven Flexibility and Instructional Judgment, and Resourcefulness and Geo-Cultural Contextualization. In managing instruction, teachers demonstrated Contextualized Resource Utilization, Curriculum Prioritization, and Adaptive Multi-Grade Pedagogical Strategies. Despite limited infrastructure, inadequate resources, and restricted professional support, teachers sustained educational delivery through resilience, creativity, and strong commitment to learners. The study concludes that while individual adaptability enables teachers to overcome contextual barriers, sustainable educational improvement in geographically isolated areas requires stronger institutional support, targeted professional development, improved infrastructure, and responsive policy interventions to promote teacher well-being and educational equity.

Keywords: geographically isolated areas, teacher resilience, instructional adaptation, phenomenology, multigrade teaching, educational equity, rural education

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in geographically isolated areas remains one of the most challenging yet essential dimensions of educational service delivery, as teachers are often required to perform their professional responsibilities under conditions marked by limited infrastructure, scarce instructional resources, difficult terrain, and restricted access to support services. Studies have shown that educators assigned to remote communities frequently encounter professional, social, and environmental constraints that affect both instructional effectiveness and personal well-being, while also serving as critical agents of educational access and inclusion (UNESCO, 2024; Azano & Stewart, 2024). Despite these adversities, teachers continue to demonstrate commitment to their learners through innovative practices, contextualized instruction, and sustained engagement with local communities (Halsey, 2020).

In the Philippine context, geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA) continue to face persistent educational inequalities associated with inadequate facilities, limited connectivity, shortages of learning materials, and challenges in teacher deployment and retention (Department of Education [DepEd], 2022; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2022). These conditions place teachers at the forefront of addressing educational

disruptions while navigating complex instructional demands that extend beyond conventional classroom responsibilities. Research indicates that educators in remote schools often assume multiple roles as facilitators, mentors, counselors, and community partners to ensure continuity of learning despite resource constraints and institutional limitations (Barley & Beesley, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

The experiences of teachers in geographically isolated settings are characterized not only by challenges but also by resilience and adaptation. Resilience enables educators to sustain motivation, maintain instructional quality, and respond constructively to adversity, while adaptation reflects their capacity to modify teaching strategies, use available resources creatively, and develop context-responsive approaches to delivering learning (Gu & Day, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2023). Such adaptive capacities are particularly evident in remote schools where teachers continuously negotiate the demands of scarcity, isolation, and educational accountability while remaining committed to learner development and educational equity (Halsey, 2020; Azano & Stewart, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores the lived experiences, resilience, and adaptation of teachers assigned to Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes in Sitio Kapihan, Socorro, Surigao del Norte. Specifically, it seeks to understand how teachers experience and interpret the realities of teaching in a geographically isolated environment, the challenges they encounter, and the coping and instructional strategies they employ to sustain learning. By foregrounding teachers' narratives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of educational practice in remote communities and provides evidence that may inform policies, support mechanisms, and intervention programs aimed at strengthening teacher well-being and improving educational delivery in geographically isolated areas.

Statement of the Problem

Specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do contextual factors influence teacher resilience and burnout?
2. How do teachers lived experiences inform instructional practices?
3. How do teachers in geographically isolated areas manage instructional practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers assigned to geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA) operate within educational environments characterized by limited infrastructure, inadequate instructional resources, and restricted access to professional support systems. Recent studies have shown that geographic remoteness continues to influence the quality of educational delivery by creating barriers to teacher effectiveness, learner engagement, and institutional sustainability. According to UNESCO (2024), schools in remote communities frequently experience shortages of qualified teachers, insufficient learning materials, and limited opportunities for professional development, all of which affect instructional quality and educational equity. Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) reported that teachers in underserved regions often encounter heavier workloads and greater professional demands than their counterparts in urban schools. Research by Roberts and Fuqua (2022) further emphasized that rural educators often take on multiple responsibilities beyond teaching, including coordinating community efforts and supporting learner welfare. Likewise, White and Kline (2021) found that geographic isolation contributes to professional marginalization and reduces opportunities for collaboration and mentoring, increasing the complexity of teachers' work in remote settings.

Despite these challenges, contemporary literature highlights the remarkable resilience and adaptability demonstrated by teachers working in isolated communities. Kim and Asbury (2023) observed that resilient educators sustain instructional effectiveness through flexibility, innovation, and strong commitment to learners despite resource limitations. In a study on teacher adaptation in remote schools, McLeod and Dulskey (2024) found that educators frequently develop context-responsive teaching strategies, improvising instructional materials and modifying pedagogical approaches to meet local realities. Similarly, Beltman and Mansfield (2022) reported that social support, professional purpose, and adaptive coping mechanisms significantly

strengthen teachers' resilience in challenging environments. Recent evidence from rural education studies also indicates that community engagement and localized instructional practices enhance teachers' capacity to navigate adversity while maintaining learner participation and achievement (Walker & Tondeur, 2023). Collectively, these studies suggest that while geographic isolation poses significant professional and personal challenges, teachers' resilience and adaptive practices play a critical role in sustaining educational access and promoting continuity of learning in marginalized communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of teachers assigned to geographically isolated areas, particularly at Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes in Sitio Kapihan, Socorro, Surigao del Norte. Guided by the phenomenological perspective of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2021), the study sought to understand how teachers make meaning of their experiences while teaching in a remote setting characterized by temporary learning spaces, limited instructional resources, lack of electricity and internet connectivity, large and multigrade classes, and challenging environmental conditions. Through in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry, the study examined the emotional, psychological, and professional realities of teachers, focusing on their challenges, coping mechanisms, resilience, instructional adaptations, and experiences of burnout. Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes served as the research locale because it represents a geographically isolated and disadvantaged educational setting where temporary schooling arrangements, resource scarcity, restrictive land-use policies, and socio-political uncertainties converge, providing a rich context for understanding how teachers sustain instruction, professional commitment, and learner support amid conditions of isolation and adversity.

Research Participants

The study involved eighteen (18) teachers and one (1) school administrator from Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes who served as participants due to their direct engagement in teaching and school management within a geographically isolated setting. A complete enumeration sampling technique was employed to include all eligible participants, ensuring comprehensive representation of experiences, perspectives, and challenges associated with teaching in Sitio Kapihan. This approach is appropriate for small populations and enables a holistic understanding of educators' lived experiences, resilience, and adaptive practices in geographically isolated areas (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Table 1. Profile of the Research Participants

Participants Code		Age	Sex	Length of Service (Years)	Teaching Position	Years Teaching at Current School
Admin	Teachers					
1		36	Male	13	P-I	1 Year
	1	28	Female	5	T-III	1 Year
	2	36	Female	9	T-I	1 Year
	3	35	Female	8	T-I	1 Year
	4	29	Female	8	T-II	1 Year
	5	33	Female	8	T-I	1 Year
	6	28	Female	5	T-III	1 Year
	7	46	Female	7	T-III	1 Year
	8	42	Female	6	T-I	1 Year
	9	30	Male	6	T-I	1 Year
	10	38	Female	8	T-II	1 Year
	11	36	Male	7	T-II	1 Year
	12	30	Male	6	T-I	1 Year
	13	35	Male	9	T-III	1 Year
	14	44	Female	7	T-I	1 Year
	15	29	Female	1	T-I	1 Year

	16	28	Female	1	T-I	1 Year
	17	28	Female	4	T-III	1 Year
	18	33	Female	6	T-I	1 Year
Total	19					

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contextual Factors Influencing Teachers' Resilience and Burnout

Table 2 presents the contextual factors influencing teachers' resilience and burnout. It highlights various environmental, personal, and organizational elements that shape teacher's ability to cope with challenges and maintain their well-being amidst demanding teaching conditions.

Table 2. Emerging Themes on Contextual Factors Affecting Teachers' Resilience & Burnout

Themes	Sub Themes
Institutional Neglect and Structural Disadvantage	Lack of infrastructure
	Absence of permanence
Workload Intensification and Role Expansion	Feeling overlooked
	Role overload
	Staffing shortage
	Limited manpower
Institutional Isolation and Limited Professional Support	Weak administrative support
	Lack of monitoring

Theme 1: Institutional Neglect and Structural Disadvantage

Teachers consistently reveal institutional neglect as a foundational condition shaping both resilience and burnout. During Phase 1 of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, participants repeatedly described the absence of permanent school buildings, insufficient instructional materials, and the lack of institutional investment in their learning environment. Statements such as participant 2 stated,

"Walay klarong building ug kulang kaayo ang materials" (There is no proper school building and there is a severe lack of materials) And participant 4 also stated,

"Temporary ra gyud among classrooms" (Our classrooms are purely temporary).

Reflecting a shared perception of institutional invisibility. This perceived neglect intensifies emotional strain, as teachers feel that their sacrifices in high-risk, high-need contexts are undervalued. Earthman (2020) emphasized that poor school facilities undermine teacher morale and contribute to emotional exhaustion, particularly in rural schools where alternatives are limited.

Theme 2: Workload Intensification and Role Expansion

Another dominant institutional condition influencing resilience and burnout is the intensification of workload resulting from staffing shortages and role expansion. Teachers repeatedly described performing multiple roles beyond classroom instruction. Participant 9 stated, *"Ikaw na teacher, ikaw pa guidance, ikaw pa clerk"* (You are already the teacher, yet you also serve as the guidance counselor and the clerk)

And participant 10 added,

"Multi-grade among klase, lisod kaayo i-manage" (Our class is multi-grade, and it is very difficult to manage).

These statements were coded as role overload, staffing shortage, and multi-grade complexity, which cohered into this theme during Phase 3 of analysis. The lack of institutional manpower forces teachers to absorb

responsibilities that would otherwise be distributed among specialized personnel. This intensification extends instructional hours, increases emotional labor, and reduces time for rest and reflection. Borman and Dowling (2020) identified excessive workload as a primary predictor of teacher burnout, particularly in geographically isolated schools where staffing support is limited.

Theme 3: Institutional Isolation and Limited Professional Support

Institutional isolation and weak professional support emerged as a critical condition shaping both resilience and burnout. Teachers frequently reported limited engagement from supervisors, lack of mentoring, and exclusion from professional development activities. Statements such as,

“Walay klarong support system gikan sa opisina (P12)” (There is no clear support system from the office),

“Panagsa ra mi ma-visit sa supervisors (P1)” (Supervisors rarely visit us),

“Wala pa gyud ko katisting og training sukad na-assign ko diri (P4)” (I have never experienced any training since I was assigned here).

Institutional isolation individualizes resilience. Teachers rely on intrinsic motivation rather than systemic reinforcement, thereby increasing their susceptibility to burnout. While commitment sustains their presence, the lack of professional affirmation, learning opportunities, and administrative engagement erodes long-term well-being.

Lived Experiences in Forming Instructional Practices

Table 3 presents the lived experiences of teachers and how these experiences shape their instructional practices, as analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis.

Table 3. Teachers’ Lived Experiences in forming Instructional Practices

Themes	Sub Themes
Learner-Centered Adaptation and Empathy	Empathy toward learners
	Compassionate teaching stance
Experience-Driven Flexibility and Instructional Judgment	Experience-driven adjustment
	Instructional discernment
Resourcefulness and Geo-Cultural Contextualization	Geo-cultural awareness
	Localized content

Theme 1: Learner-Centered Adaptation and Empathy

Teachers lived experiences of hardship, deprivation, and struggle profoundly inform a learner-centered pedagogy grounded in empathy. Participants consistently articulated that their own experiences of difficulty enabled them to better understand learners who face similar socio-economic constraints. Statements such as,

“Mas nakasabot ko sa panginahanglan sa mga estudyante (P3)” (I better understand the needs of the students) and

“Masabtan nako ang bata kay nakaagi pud ko ana (P4)” (I can understand the child because I have gone through the same experience) reflect how personal adversity becomes a source of pedagogical insight.

Relatively, empathy was not merely coded as an emotional disposition but interpreted as an instructional orientation. Teachers consciously adjusted lesson pacing, expectations, and assessment practices to accommodate learners’ realities. This aligns with Noddings’ (2020) ethic of care, which posits that effective teaching, particularly in marginalized contexts, emerges from relational attentiveness rather than technical compliance. Teachers’ empathy transforms classrooms into emotionally safe spaces where learners’ struggles are acknowledged rather than penalized.

Theme 2: Experience-Driven Flexibility and Instructional Judgment

Teachers' narratives reveal that instructional flexibility is deeply rooted in lived experience rather than formal pedagogical training alone. Participants emphasized their ability to discern which strategies are effective in their context, as reflected in statements such as,

"Kabalo nako unsay epektibo ug unsay dili (P1)" (I already know what is effective and what is not) and

"Dali nako ma-adjust ang leksyon depende sa sitwasyon (P4)" (I can easily adjust the lesson depending on the situation).

These accounts were coded as reflective judgment and instructional adaptability, forming a coherent pattern of experience-driven teaching.

Interpretively, teachers' flexibility functions as a form of tacit knowledge developed through sustained engagement with contextual constraints. Rather than rigidly following lesson guides, teachers exercise professional judgment shaped by repeated encounters with learner diversity, limited resources, and fluctuating attendance. Darling-Hammond et al. (2021) argue that such adaptive expertise is central to effective teaching in under-resourced environments, where standardized approaches often fail to account for contextual complexity.

Theme 3: Resourcefulness and Geo-Cultural Contextualization

Teachers' familiarity with the local culture, geography, and community life significantly informs instructional content and delivery. Participants described deliberately integrating local stories, practices, and examples into lessons, as reflected in

"Gipili nako ang lokal nga mga istorya aron masabtan sa bata (P3)" (I chose local stories so that the children can understand better)and

"Gigamit nako ang kultura sa komunidad isip pananglitan (P6)" (I used the community's culture as an example).

These responses were coded as cultural integration and geo-contextual awareness. This theme highlights how teachers' lived embeddedness within the community enables culturally responsive instruction. Rather than viewing local culture as peripheral to formal education, teachers position it as a central pedagogical resource. Gkontzou and Zachos (2024) emphasize that learning becomes more meaningful when instruction reflects learners' identities, lived experiences, and community contexts. However, teachers often compensate for curriculum misalignment by taking on additional cultural and emotional labor, especially in marginalized and under-resourced settings. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2021) note that while contextualized teaching enhances equity, it should not replace institutional responsibility for culturally inclusive curriculum design.

Teachers in geographically isolated areas manage instructional practices

Table 4. Teachers' Management on Instructional Practices in GIA

Themes	Sub Themes
Managing Instruction Through Contextualized Resource Utilization	Resource improvisation
	Use of local/indigenous materials
	Teacher-created materials
Managing Curriculum Pacing Through Instructional Prioritization	Curriculum adjustment
	Foundational skill prioritization
	Flexible pacing
Managing Multi-Grade Instruction Through Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies	Multi-grade teaching
	Peer-assisted learning
	Instructional differentiation

Theme 1: Managing Instruction Through Contextualized Resource Utilization

Teachers manage instruction by redefining available resources and aligning them with lesson objectives. In the absence of textbooks and instructional kits, participants described deliberate strategies for creating teaching materials from locally available objects. Participant 6 explained,

“Kung walay libro, kami na mismo maghimo og materials gamit ang naa sa palibot ” (When there are no books, we ourselves create materials using what is available around us),

while participant 7 added,

“Ang kahoy, dahon, ug bato mahimo na namo og visual aids” (Wood, leaves, and stones can already be used as visual aids).

These practices were coded as resource improvisation and local material utilization and clustered into this theme. From an instructional management perspective, this approach reflects proactive planning rather than spontaneous coping. Teachers intentionally select materials that are accessible, durable, and familiar to learners, ensuring continuity of lessons despite scarcity. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) emphasize that in remote contexts, instructional management often involves resource substitution and contextual alignment rather than the use of formal materials.

Theme 2: Managing Curriculum Pacing Through Instructional Prioritization

Curriculum management in geographically isolated areas is characterized by flexible pacing and selective prioritization. Teachers reported consciously adjusting lesson plans to match learners' actual competencies. Participant 18 stated,

“Dili gyud masunod ang lesson guide kay kinahanglan una ang pagbasa” (The lesson guide cannot really be followed because reading must come first),

while participant 9 shared,

“Balik mi sa basics bisan taas na ilang grade” (We go back to the basics even if their grade level is already high).

These responses were coded as curriculum adjustment and foundational skill prioritization.

Instructional management here involves constant decision-making: teachers determine which competencies are essential and which can be deferred. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) note that effective instruction in disadvantaged settings depends on responsive pacing that addresses learning gaps before advancing content.

Theme 3: Managing Multi-Grade Instruction Through Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies

Multi-grade teaching emerged as a central instructional management challenge. Participants described managing multiple grade levels simultaneously, as participant 15 reflected,

“Multi-grade among klase, lain-lain og lebel ang mga bata” (Our class is multi-grade, and the children are at different levels).

These accounts were coded as multi-grade teaching and instructional differentiation.

Teachers described structured strategies such as staggered instruction, peer tutoring, and rotational tasks. Participant 18 shared,

“Ang mas kusog nga bata akong ipatabang sa uban” (I ask the stronger students to help the others).

Demonstrating intentional classroom organization, Carrete-Marín (2024) emphasized that effective instructional management in multigrade classrooms requires careful planning, continuous monitoring, adaptability, and the strategic use of limited resources to address diverse learner needs simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of teachers in geographically isolated areas reveal that teaching in such settings is characterized by persistent structural challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, intensified workloads, and limited professional support. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by employing learner-centered approaches, contextualized instruction, resource improvisation, and flexible pedagogical strategies to sustain learning in remote communities. Their experiences highlight how resilience is not merely an individual attribute but a continuous response to institutional and environmental limitations that shape daily educational practice. The findings further underscore that while teachers' commitment and ingenuity enable them to overcome many barriers, long-term educational quality and teacher well-being cannot rely solely on personal sacrifice. Strengthening institutional support, improving access to professional development, enhancing school facilities, and providing responsive policies for geographically isolated schools are essential to ensuring equitable, sustainable, and inclusive education for marginalized learners.

Declaration

Use of AI Technology: The authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist in grammar checking, language enhancement, manuscript organization, and editorial refinement during the preparation of this manuscript. All research activities, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions were conducted and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the work.

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Human Participants and Ethical Considerations: This study involved human participants and adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All information gathered was used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

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