

Teaching in Isolation: Narratives of Teachers in Geographically Isolated Areas (GIA)

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Abstract— This study explored the lived experiences of teachers assigned to Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes in Sitio Kapihan, a geographically isolated and disadvantaged area in Socorro, Surigao del Norte, Philippines. Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with eighteen teachers and one school administrator and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed four major challenges: non-conducive learning environments, learning gaps and academic delays, lack of instructional materials and resources, and limited access to electricity and internet connectivity. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience through various coping mechanisms, including peer and social support, spiritual and emotional coping, engagement in hobbies and leisure activities, physical and mental wellness practices, and family and community support. The study concludes that while teachers effectively adapt to challenging conditions, sustained institutional support, improved infrastructure, and enhanced resource provision are essential to ensuring equitable, high-quality education in geographically isolated communities.

Keywords— Geographically Isolated Areas (GIA), teacher resilience, phenomenology, educational challenges, coping mechanisms, rural education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The provision of education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA) remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, as learners often face limited access to schools, inadequate educational resources, and disrupted learning opportunities [1]. In the Philippines, these concerns became evident in Sitio Kapihan, Bucas Grande Island, where many families relocated to mountainous areas following the 2019 earthquake, resulting in prolonged interruptions in children’s formal schooling [2]. To address this educational gap, the Department of Education–Caraga established the Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes in November 2023 through temporary learning shelters known as LAGKAW, enabling displaced learners to regain access to basic education services [3]. However, teachers assigned to these extension classes continue to work under difficult circumstances, including multigrade instruction, inadequate facilities, limited instructional materials, and restricted access to electricity and internet connectivity [4].

Research on multigrade and remote education has consistently shown that teachers in geographically isolated schools face complex instructional demands while working

with insufficient resources and support systems [5]. International evidence further indicates that educational inequities are intensified when schools lack qualified personnel, professional development opportunities, and adequate learning environments, thereby affecting both teaching quality and student achievement [6]. Likewise, studies on rural education emphasize that schools in underserved communities often face structural constraints that affect teacher effectiveness, learner engagement, and educational outcomes [7]. These findings suggest that ensuring quality education in GIDA contexts requires a deeper understanding of the realities experienced by frontline educators who serve marginalized populations [8].

The challenges encountered in remote schools are further reflected in national educational reports, which identify inadequate classrooms, non-standard learning spaces, limited access to instructional resources, and difficult geographical terrain as major barriers to effective teaching and learning [9]. Such conditions contribute to persistent educational disparities, particularly in communities where teachers are required to perform multiple roles while receiving minimal institutional support [10]. Moreover, evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to resource scarcity and professional isolation may affect teachers’ well-being, resilience, and capacity to sustain quality instruction in disadvantaged settings [11]. Understanding how teachers navigate these challenges is therefore essential for informing policies and interventions that promote educational equity and sustainable learning opportunities in remote areas [12].

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the lived experiences of teachers assigned to the Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes, which currently serve displaced learners residing in Sitio Kapihan and nearby communities [13]. Specifically, the study explores the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the instructional strategies they develop to sustain learning despite environmental, institutional, and social constraints [14]. Examining these experiences provides valuable insights into how teachers adapt to conditions of scarcity while supporting learners’ academic recovery and educational participation [15]. Ultimately, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of responsive support programs, context-sensitive educational interventions, and evidence-based policies that strengthen teaching and learning in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas [16].

II. METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research design, respondents, instruments, and statistical methods used to examine the relationships among the study's key variables.

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of teachers assigned to Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes, a geographically isolated educational setting. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study examined how teachers navigate instructional, emotional, and professional challenges, develop resilience, and adapt their practices in response to resource limitations and isolation, generating insights that may inform educational policies and intervention programs for geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas.

B. Research Key Informants

The participants of this study consisted of all eighteen (18) teachers from the Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes and one (1) school administrator. These individuals were included as key informants due to their direct involvement in the teaching process and the specific challenges encountered within the geographically isolated context of Sitio Kapihan.

C. Instrumentation

A validated 15-item semi-structured interview guide was utilized to collect in-depth qualitative data on the lived experiences of teachers at Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes, focusing on challenges, coping mechanisms, resilience, burnout, and instructional adaptations in a geographically isolated setting. Prior to data collection, the instrument underwent expert validation by experienced educators and researchers to ensure its clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness, and its alignment with the study objectives, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected.

D. Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis framework, supported by content analysis to systematically identify, interpret, and validate recurring patterns, themes, and concepts related to teachers’ lived experiences in a geographically isolated setting. The combined use of these analytical methods provided both depth and breadth in understanding how teachers perceived, responded to, and adapted to the challenges of teaching in Sitio Kapihan, thereby enhancing the rigor and comprehensiveness of the findings.

E. Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by employing in-depth interviews, data saturation, rich contextual descriptions, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and systematic thematic analysis to enhance the

rigor and reliability of the findings. Furthermore, strict ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, secure data management, protection of minors’ identities, and institutional ethical approval, safeguarding participants’ rights and well-being throughout the research process.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the study's findings based on the gathered data, highlighting key results and their implications for the research objectives.

A. Primary Challenges Faced by Teachers

It highlights the major difficulties participants experience in carrying out their teaching responsibilities in a geographically isolated setting. The themes reflect the realities of teaching in an environment characterized by limited resources, physical inaccessibility, and demanding working conditions, all of which affect the delivery of quality instruction and the effective management of classroom situations.

Theme 1: Non-Conducive Learning Environment

The participants' narratives reveal that the lack of permanent school infrastructure remains a fundamental challenge shaping the realities of teaching in the Kapihan Extension Classes.

Participant 1 shared,

“Aduna lang mi temporary learning center nga gitawag og LAGKAW, nga dili kaayo komportable sa pagklase.” (We only have a temporary learning center called a LAGKAW, which is not very comfortable for teaching.)

While participant 2 explained,

“Wala gyud mi klarong building, puro ra temporary nga learning shelter hinimo sa kahoy ug trapal.” (We really do not have a proper school building; everything is only a temporary learning shelter made of wood and tarpaulin.)

TABLE 1. Teachers’ Primary Challenges

Themes	Sub Themes
Non-Conducive Learning Environment	Temporary learning shelters
	Absence of permanent classrooms
	Poor ventilation and health risk
Learning Gaps and Academic Delay	Weak foundational skills
	Extensive remediation demands
	Interrupted schooling
Lack of Instructional Materials and Resources	Insufficient learning resources
	Improvised teaching materials
	Out-of-pocket spending
	No electricity
Limited Access to Electricity and Internet Connectivity	Communication barriers
	Technological deprivation
	Multi-grade teaching

The prevalence of temporary learning shelters reflects a state of educational vulnerability, in which teachers are compelled to deliver instruction in environments lacking the stability and functionality expected of formal school settings. Such conditions extend beyond physical discomfort, as inadequate infrastructure can constrain effective classroom management, limit instructional innovation, and negatively

affect learner concentration and participation. Furthermore, the absence of durable educational facilities reflects broader inequities in the allocation of educational resources, reinforcing the need for sustained infrastructure investments to support quality and inclusive learning in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas [17].

Theme 2: Learning Gaps and Academic Delay

Participants described learners entering formal schooling with severely underdeveloped foundational skills, particularly in reading, writing, and basic numeracy, which are typically acquired in early childhood education.

Participant 4 shared,

“Daghan kaayo sa mga bata dili pa kabalo mobasa bisan naa na sila sa taas nga grade,” (Many of the children still cannot read even though they are already in higher grade levels.)

While participant 7 explained,

“Ang uban kay late na kaayo naka-enroll, mao nga dako kaayo og gap sa ilang kahibalo.” (Others enrolled very late, which is why there is a very big gap in their knowledge.)

These accounts affirm that academic delay is not an isolated occurrence but a cumulative outcome of prolonged school disruption, poverty, and limited access to early learning opportunities. The participants’ emphasis on learners’ inability to read despite being in higher grade levels suggests a significant disconnect between grade placement and actual learning competencies. This gap reflects how interrupted schooling and delayed enrollment disrupt the natural progression of foundational skills, particularly literacy, which is essential for all subsequent learning [18][19].

Theme 3: Lack of Instructional Materials and Resources

Participants repeatedly articulated that the absence of basic learning tools is not occasional but an enduring reality.

Participant 7 stated,

“Kuwang kaayo mi sa libro ug papel, mao nga mag-improvise ra gyud mi.” (We are really lacking books and paper, so we are forced to improvise.)

While Participant 7 also shared,

“Usahay personal kwarta na gyud nako ang magamit para naa lang magamit ang mga bata.” (Sometimes I already use my own personal money just so the children have something to use.)

These narratives demonstrate that resource scarcity is a persistent structural challenge that shapes teachers’ daily instructional realities rather than a temporary or isolated inconvenience. The participants’ repeated references to severe shortages and their reliance on personal financial resources highlight systemic inequities in the provision of educational materials, placing additional burdens on teachers who must bridge resource gaps to sustain learning. Such circumstances illustrate how inadequate resource allocation can constrain instructional effectiveness, increase teacher workload, and reinforce educational disparities in geographically isolated schools, where educators often assume responsibilities beyond their formal professional roles [20][21].

Theme 4: Limited Access to Electricity and Internet Connectivity

Participants consistently emphasized that most classrooms operate without a stable power source, rendering digital teaching tools unusable.

Participant 10 shared,

“Way kuryente, dili mi gyud kagamit og laptop o TV sa klase” (There is no electricity, so we really cannot use laptops or TVs in class.)

while Participant 12 stated,

“Manual ra gyud tanan, bisag gusto mi magamit og video o slides.” (Everything is really manual, even if we want to use videos or slides.)

These accounts underscore how the absence of electricity constrains instructional possibilities and reinforces traditional teaching methods. The participants’ emphasis on “manual ra gyud tanan” highlights that teaching is largely dependent on chalk-and-talk approaches, limiting opportunities for interactive and multimodal learning. Although teachers are aware of the benefits of using videos, presentations, and other digital tools, their inability to access such resources creates a gap between their instructional intentions and actual classroom practice. Consequently, lesson delivery becomes less dynamic, and teachers must rely heavily on verbal explanations and improvised materials, which may not fully support diverse learning needs[22][23].

B. Coping Mechanisms in Managing Isolation-Related Stress

Based on the themes, their coping strategies center on peer and social support, spiritual and emotional coping, engagement in hobbies and leisure activities, physical and mental wellness practices, and family connections and community support.

TABLE 2: Teachers’ Coping Mechanisms in Managing Isolation-Related Stress

Themes	Sub Themes
Peer and Social Support	Seeking colleague interaction
	Digital connection
	Avoiding isolation
Spiritual and Emotional Coping	Prayer and faith
	Spiritual reflection
	Emotional regulation
Engagement in Hobbies and Leisure	Leisure activities
	Cognitive diversion
	Therapeutic hobby
Physical and Mental Wellness Practices	Physical activity
	Self-care routines
	Time management
Family Connection and Community Support	Family bonding
	Community encouragement
	Social belonging

Theme 1: Peer and Social Support

Peer and social support emerged as a central coping mechanism through which teachers managed the emotional strain of prolonged isolation in Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes. Across participants’ narratives, talking with colleagues repeatedly emerged as a vital means of emotional release and psychological grounding. Statements such as,

“Makig-istorya ko sa akong mga kauban aron dili ko ma-stress (P1)” (I talk with my colleagues so that I do not become stressed) and

“Makigbarkada ko aron dili ko mag-inusara (P3)” (I socialize with others so that I will not feel alone).

These were initially coded as seeking colleague interaction and avoidance of isolation during Phase 2 of Braun and Clarke’s analysis. These codes were later clustered into a broader pattern that emphasizes interpersonal connection as a shared and meaningful coping response. The recurrence of these narratives among participants indicates that peer interaction is not incidental but rather a collective strategy for emotional survival in an isolated teaching environment [24][25].

Theme 2: Spiritual and Emotional Coping

Spiritual and emotional coping emerged as a significant internal resource through which teachers managed the emotional weight of isolation and sustained their resilience. During Phase 1 of Braun and Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis, participants frequently cited prayer, faith, emotional reflection, and reliance on inner strength as coping strategies for stress. Statements such as,

“Mag-ampo gyud ko kung bug-at na kaayo ang akong gibati (P7)” (I really pray when what I am feeling becomes very heavy) and

“Ang pagtuo nako mao’y nagpalig-on sa akong kasingkasing (P3)” (My faith is what strengthens my heart).

These were initially coded as spiritual reliance and emotional regulation, which later clustered into the theme Spiritual and Emotional Coping. Teachers described spirituality as a grounding force that helped them make sense of hardship and uncertainty. In moments of exhaustion, self-doubt, or frustration, prayer and faith practices provided emotional calm and a renewed sense of purpose. One participant shared that spiritual reflection allowed them to release negative emotions and regain patience with learners. This reflects how spirituality functions not merely as a belief but as an emotional regulation mechanism that supports psychological endurance [26][27].

Theme 3: Engagement in Hobbies and Leisure

Engagement in hobbies and leisure activities emerged as an important coping mechanism for managing isolation-related stress and emotional fatigue among teachers. Participants frequently mentioned activities they engaged in outside of teaching, such as listening to music, watching videos, gardening, or simple recreational tasks. Statements such as,

“Kung naay free time, maminaw ko og music para ma-relax (P6)” (When I have free time, I listen to music to relax) and

“Magtanom-tanom ko aron mawala ang stress (P18)” (I do gardening so that the stress will go away).

These were initially coded as leisure engagement and stress diversion, which were later clustered into the theme Engagement in Hobbies and Leisure. Teachers described these activities as intentional efforts to disengage from work-related pressures mentally. In an environment where professional boundaries were blurred by limited staffing and multi-role

expectations, hobbies provided a rare sense of personal space and autonomy. One participant shared that leisure activities helped them “reset” emotionally after long and exhausting teaching days. This reflects how leisure functions not merely as entertainment but as a psychological coping resource that restores emotional balance[28][29].

Theme 4: Physical and Mental Wellness Practices

Physical and mental wellness practices also emerged as a deliberate coping strategy used by teachers to manage the cumulative effects of stress and exhaustion. Participants described engaging in activities such as walking, stretching, prayer, meditation, and self-reflection. Statements like,

“Maglakaw-lakaw ko aron maibsan ang kakapoy (P4)” (I walk around to reduce my tiredness) and

“Mag-ampo ko kung bug-at na kaayo ang gibati (P8)” (I pray when what I am feeling becomes too heavy).

These were coded as physical self-care and mental regulation, eventually forming the theme Physical and Mental Wellness Practices. Teachers perceived these practices as essential for maintaining emotional stability and physical endurance. In the absence of formal wellness programs or mental health services, participants relied on self-initiated strategies to cope with stress. One teacher explained that prayer and reflection helped them manage frustration and regain emotional clarity, particularly after difficult teaching days. This reflects how wellness practices serve as internal regulatory mechanisms, enabling teachers to maintain composure and focus[30][31].

Theme 5: Family Connection and Community Support

Family connection and community support emerged as a deeply relational coping mechanism that buffered teachers against isolation and emotional strain. Participants frequently spoke about maintaining contact with family members despite distance and drawing strength from the local community. Statements such as,

“Makig-istorya ko sa akong pamilya bisan layo sila (P17)” (I talk with my family even if they are far away) and

“Ang komunidad maoy kusog namong suporta (16)” (The community is our strongest support).

These were coded as family connection and community encouragement, later clustered into the theme Family Connection and Community Support.

Teachers described family communication as a vital source of emotional grounding. Regular conversations with parents, siblings, or partners helped alleviate loneliness and reminded teachers of their identity beyond the workplace. Even limited phone calls or messages were described as emotionally restorative. This highlights how relational continuity sustains resilience when physical proximity is absent[32][33].

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that teachers assigned to Del Pilar Community School–Kapihan Extension Classes experience multifaceted challenges associated with teaching in a geographically isolated and disadvantaged area, including inadequate and temporary learning infrastructure, shortages of instructional materials, lack of electricity, and significant learning gaps among learners. These conditions reflect

persistent structural and resource-related inequities that complicate instructional delivery and increase professional demands. Despite these difficulties, the teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience by adapting their teaching practices, improvising available resources, and maintaining their commitment to providing quality education. Their experiences underscore the critical role of teacher agency in sustaining learning opportunities within marginalized communities where educational support systems remain limited.

Furthermore, the study found that teachers employ diverse coping mechanisms to maintain their emotional well-being and professional effectiveness, including peer interaction, spiritual and emotional coping, engaging in hobbies and leisure activities, physical and mental wellness practices, and relying on family and community support. These coping strategies function as essential protective mechanisms that enable teachers to manage stress, maintain motivation, and navigate the challenges of isolation. The findings suggest that while individual resilience plays a significant role in sustaining educational delivery, long-term improvement requires institutional interventions that address infrastructural deficiencies, strengthen psychosocial support systems, enhance resource provision, and promote teacher well-being. Ultimately, supporting teachers in geographically isolated areas is essential for advancing equitable, inclusive, and sustainable educational opportunities for underserved learners.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the Department of Education, local government units, and other stakeholders prioritize the improvement of educational infrastructure, the provision of adequate instructional resources, and access to electricity and digital technologies in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. School administrators should also strengthen teacher support mechanisms by implementing regular psychosocial wellness programs, professional development initiatives, peer mentoring systems, and community partnership activities that promote teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness. Furthermore, targeted literacy intervention programs should be developed to address learners' foundational skill gaps. At the same time, future studies may explore the long-term impact of resilience-building and support interventions on teacher performance and learner outcomes in remote educational settings.

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