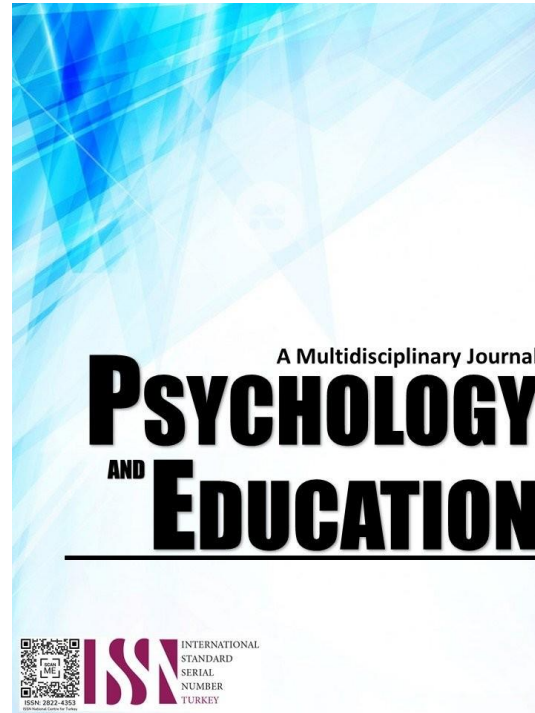


NAVIGATING EDUCATIONAL FRONTIERS: UNWEAVING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN FAR-FLUNG SCHOOLS ON NEGROS ISLAND



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Navigating Educational Frontiers: Unweaving the Challenges Faced by Teachers in Far-flung Schools on Negros Island

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Abstract

This narrative analysis study aimed to determine the challenges encountered by ten (10) teachers assigned to far-flung schools, how they cope with those challenges and their realizations. The participants were assigned to the far-flung schools in the two (2) divisions of Negros Island. The data collection was done through an in-depth guided interview using a written interview form. Participants were identified using purposive sampling and guided by the following criteria: (a) teachers assigned to far-flung schools; (b) being able to share their challenges encountered as conversation partners; and (c) being willing to discuss their challenges and experiences as teachers in far-flung schools. The personal narrative experiences of the teachers were grouped into three (3) general codes: (1) "Navigating the Wilderness: Challenges of Teaching in Far-flung Schools," (2) "Strategies for Thriving in Far-flung Teaching Environments," and (3) "Beyond Borders: Realizations and Rewards of Teaching in Far-flung Schools." Results show that the main common challenges of the participants include challenges in the physical aspect, such as difficulties in transportation, limited resources, a lack of electricity and internet connection, etc. Also, emotional and social challenges are being encountered, such as leaving homes and loved ones and staying at school during the whole weekdays, and difficulties in dealing with the people and the community where the school is located. This study also showed the teachers' innovativeness, creativity, and resilience as they relentlessly handled every situation with a positive mindset. Lastly, it has unfolded the teachers' self-realizations, reflections, and insights gained from their personal experiences.

Keywords: *teachers' narratives, far-flung schools, teaching challenges, teachers' realizations, insights gained*

Introduction

Globally, addressing the imperative of delivering quality education to rural youth is paramount, given that many countries adhere to a centralized education system that often neglects rural realities and stimulates substantial scholarly debates (Koza Çiftçi & Cin, 2020). Despite long-standing concerns among rural education researchers about teacher recruitment and retention, efforts to specifically prepare educators for rural classrooms remain relatively obscure. Notably, challenges such as poverty, geographic isolation, low teacher salaries, and inadequate community amenities persistently overshadow the advantages of rural living (Azano & Stewart, 2016).

Initiatives like Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals, aimed at increasing schooling in the developing world, including the Philippines, often underestimated concerns about the quality of education, particularly in rural areas (Molosiwa & Boikhuto, 2016). Addressing these concerns is vital to initiate rural development, as rural schools and education serve as crucial tools for community survival (Roberts & Downes, 2016).

When discussing how rural schools and education contribute to community development, it's essential to broaden the focus beyond economic sustainability (Roberts, 2015). Shifting the debate away from viewing education solely through an economic lens is necessary. While rural education studies often concentrate on school constraints, resource scarcity, or quantitative aspects such as population and income, few delve into the challenges faced by teachers (Rao & Ye, 2016).

The World Bank attributes poor student performance in rural schools to the issue of poor teacher retention. Effective teaching, resulting in desired learning outcomes, is contingent upon capable and professionally qualified instructors. However, rural schools often lack such teachers, leading to subpar education quality (Shikalepo, 2020). Heeralal (2014) suggests that school officials must take necessary steps to mitigate the negative effects of these challenges on teaching in rural schools, enabling teachers to deliver lessons as effectively as possible and improve school performance.

To date, remote schools in the Philippines still grapple with a shortage of teaching resources, continuously challenging teachers to deliver quality basic education in rural areas. The conditions of far-flung schools necessitate passionate, committed teachers to provide essential services. Moreover, there is a pressing need to devise interventions to overcome the challenges faced by far-flung teachers and enhance their situation. Thus, this study delves into the challenges encountered by teachers assigned to remote schools, their coping mechanisms, and their realizations.

Research Questions

This research paper aimed at identifying the challenges encountered by teachers in Far-flung Schools in the two Divisions of Negros Island using the Personal Experiences Narratives. Specifically, this research study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges you encountered as a teacher in a far-flung school?

2. How do you cope with those challenges?
3. What are your realizations being a teacher in a far-flung school?

Literature Review

The review of the literature and related studies with due connections to the present study are hereby discussed on the content of the conceptualized framework and the objectives set in this study.

Experiences of Teachers in a Far-flung School

Azano and Stewart (2016) assessed the effectiveness of deliberate efforts in our teacher preparation program to increase readiness for rural teaching. Their analysis and discussion, drawn on critical and sociocultural theories to understand the experiences of a cohort of teacher candidates as they explore personal histories, the importance of place, expectations, and teaching strategies for rural contexts. They concluded their article with recommendations for enhancing teacher preparation programs in ways that might result in significant progress toward the goal of staffing rural schools with the highly skilled teachers all students deserve. Teachers and other professionals have historically found it challenging to find and stay employed at schools in remote locations. Due to the ongoing difficulty in finding and keeping qualified instructors in rural schools, teaching conditions there continue to deteriorate (Shikalepo, 2020).

Maintaining excellent standards of instruction in rural and distant places in China can be supported by the use of digital educational resources. Despite the use of a variety of digital educational materials, multimedia courseware, and electronic lesson plans dominated the way that courses were delivered. The use of digital instructional tools does not appear to be correlated with any school-level characteristics, according to the results of a multilevel regression study. On the other hand, the usage of digital educational resources by teachers was found to be significantly explained by greater levels of attitudes, knowledge, and abilities, better-supporting conditions, instructors' age, and their prior teaching experience.

On the other hand, the usage of digital educational resources by teachers was found to be significantly explained by greater levels of attitudes, knowledge, and abilities, better-supporting conditions, instructors' age, and their prior teaching experience. The intention to use, self-efficacy, and subjective norm, among other important variables, did not, however, account for variations in usage in the context of rural schools (Wang et al., 2019).

The study by Aziz et al. (2019) showed that because of the inadequate physical environment, lack of teaching tools, and limited English environment, rural schools do not benefit from a conducive setting to assist teaching and learning. Along with students' disruptive behaviors, an overwhelming workload, and a lack of assistance, the data also showed that dealing with low English proficiency (LEP) children was the primary source of stress for English teachers in rural schools. Teachers use a stress appraisal approach to first analyze and rank potential ways to deal with the stress. Teachers were shown to employ a variety of coping mechanisms, including social, professional, institutional, and personal ones, to manage stress. It is still being argued that place-based informal design immersion programs could be a novel way to engage and educate both students and teachers with design, thereby building the competencies required for successful twenty-first-century futures, since educators in regional and rural areas frequently experience geographical, social, and professional isolation (Wright et al., 2020).

Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Far-flung Schools

According to Barcena (2018), it is very challenging for teachers to be assigned to rural areas because they have to endure a range of uncomfortable means of transportation, like "large jeepneys," "habal-habals," and even riding horses and walking for extended distances to get to their station. Remote schools frequently lack essential resources (Figueroa et al., 2016) and employ instructors who may experience a range of stressors that could impair their effectiveness (Hartney, 2016).

The study discovered that the effort to deal with the lack of fundamental teaching materials, being overburdened with administrative and teaching responsibilities, underfunding of schools, and low teacher wages defined teaching. Additionally, most teachers lacked the skills necessary to improvise lesson plans and teaching materials in the absence of adequate resources, which made education unproductive. Because financial, recreational, and health service centers were difficult to reach in rural areas, instructors there often felt alone. This reduced their morale and reduced their ability to teach effectively. It was determined that the majority of teachers in rural schools earned less money than their peers in other professions with equivalent levels of training, experience, and contribution to their work. Teachers were discouraged by these inequalities, which had a detrimental impact on how well they taught (Shikalepo, 2020).

Moreover, those teachers also sacrifice their spare time for their families because instead, they are going home every day after a tiring day of teaching, many of them choose to stay at the place where they are teaching because the communities are just too far away from their homes. Their original home where their family lives is somehow becoming their vacation house because they go home during weekends and sometimes just a few times a month depending on the number of school duties that need to be done (Limin, 2018).

Despite most teachers reporting isolation in rural communities, some teachers were raised in rural areas and still reside there with their families. These teachers opted to stay with their families and helped them because they had grown up in rural areas and were accustomed to country life. Because of the familiar surroundings and proximity to family, teachers chose to stay in rural locations. Teachers were

content in the rural setting despite having to care for their families. This implies that not all is negative about rural teaching, as it might be rewarding to work and live in a rural location. Rural locations offered a secure environment with a welcoming sense of community and connection to nature. Rural-born educators did not feel lonely and were pleased in their familiar surroundings. Along with being more accustomed to the surroundings, living in rural locations was less expensive than in cities, especially when living with family, which was common practice in rural areas (Shikalepo, 2020).

To ensure that all students, regardless of where they reside, receive high-quality instruction, schools need to cultivate, draw in, and keep qualified instructors. The quality of work environments is a major factor in schools' ability to provide excellent instruction. Working conditions, as defined by Ali, Abdiaziz, and Abdigani (2013), encompass the physical workspace as well as other external factors that have an impact on employees, including workload, working hours, amenities, legal rights, and obligations.

Due mostly to pervasive poverty, there were few opportunities for teachers to supplement their income after work in rural areas through school-based incentives and private tutoring of students, which were common in many urban areas (Shadreck, 2014).

Moreover, Redding and Walberg (2012) claimed that instructors in rural schools felt alone since they couldn't easily access economic infrastructures due to their geographical remoteness. Teachers had to go to cities to access banks and other financial institutions to get their salaries. Because they take advantage of the opportunity to shop before returning to remote areas, teachers who visit banking institutions to obtain their paycheck may be absent from schools for more than one day, contributing to the isolation of these schools. This configuration has a detrimental effect on instruction quality since it wastes time that could be spent on lesson planning.

These are the reasons why the government must give additional benefits and compensation to the teachers in far-flung areas. Monthly or even quarterly incentives will do because aside from offering a portion of their salaries to buy food and school supplies for students who cannot afford to buy their needs, they are more than challenged because some have to walk some kilometers in muddy and slippery trails and has to wake up very early just to come to school on time (Limin, 2018).

Methodology

This study utilized the qualitative-narrative analysis research design. Narrative analysis is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information was then often retold or re-storied by the researcher into a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative combines views from the participants' lives with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly (2000) as cited by Creswell (2009).

They can be shared with loved ones, friends, or total strangers. They may be personal or public. In line with this, the Personal Experience Narratives about the challenges encountered by teachers assigned in far-flung schools were focused on in this study. With these, the researchers took their experiences narratively based on the belief that interviews would best capture how participants interpreted their experiences, the factors they viewed as challenges, and the factors to which they attributed their coping mechanisms and their realizations being a teacher in a far-flung school. In addition, the researcher adopted a critical theorist perspective with the hope that "walking a mile in another's shoes" would increase awareness, change societal perceptions, and influence further research on the educational experiences of far-flung teachers.

Specifically, this study adopted the Story Analysis Model used by Akinsanya and Bach (2014) which was cited by Esparar, Sabidalas, and Peralta (2022), who described how each component could be used to examine narrative patterns and spot recurrent themes and ideas. This model may also represent the narrative structure of this study, which consists of a series of questions. In a nutshell, what is the subject of this story? Who, when, and where did the experiences happen? What complicated action was done? What followed? What made this study interesting? What ultimately transpired—as a resolution? Finally, the coda which contained the lessons learned from the participants' narratives.

The participants of this study were ten (10) teachers assigned to the different far-flung schools on Negros Island. The criteria for selecting the informants were as follows: (a) teachers assigned to far-flung schools on Negros Island; (b) being able to share their challenges encountered as conversation partners; and (c) being willing to discuss their challenges and experiences as teachers in far-flung schools. The researchers personally visited the respondents to give them the interview form.

Moreover, written interview forms (WIF) and in-depth interviews (IDI) were used in the research study. The participants in this study told the researcher their stories in depth in written interviews. The research tool collected participant narratives that provided a clear picture of the difficulties they faced and how they all overcame them to become resilient.

The researchers prepared the letter approved by the superintendent through Planning and Research. After the letter was approved, the researchers discussed with the heads of the schools about how to carry out the study. To distribute the written interview form with in-depth interview questions to the teacher participants who were identified and chosen following the inclusion criteria, the researcher requested permission from the heads of the schools. Participants' information was obtained through a written interview form.

Esparar et al., (2022) cited Akinsanya and Bach (2014)'s Discussion Model as the basis for their analysis and interpretation of the written narratives. The participants were asked to confirm the narrative summary to verify the accuracy of their answers in a follow-up interview. A written interview form was used to collect information from the participants. In a follow-up interview, the participants

were asked to confirm the narrative summary to ensure the accuracy of their responses.

The components of Akinsanya and Bach's Discussion Model were as follows:

Factor 1 (Abstract). The first part of Akinsanya and Bach's narrative paradigm is the abstract. The entire story is summarized in the narrative's opening. The story's nature and events are explained in the abstract; however, some linguists argue that the abstract can also be found in the story's title, which contains one or two clauses that sum up the story in the first sentence.

Factor 2 (Orientation). This component includes information about a character's initial behavior as well as their time-setting name and orientation clause. This orientation encompasses details about their initial actions, offering insights into the timeline, the character's surroundings, and the overall context of the unfolding story. Presented in the past progressive, the orientation delves into events preceding the narrated incident, emphasizing that independent clauses, often found at the story's outset, contribute significantly to establishing the setting.

Factor 3 (Complicating Action). The complex action pertains to the real events within the novel that propel the plot forward and captivate readers. The narrative sentences comprising the story's structure delineate the subsequent events, responding to the question of "what happened next."

Factor 4 (Resolution). Within Akinsanya and Bach's narrative model, resolution stands out as a key element. This aspect encompasses the part in the personal narratives where the complexities described are addressed and resolved.

Factor 5 (Evaluation). This factor outlines the purpose or rationale behind deeming the story worth telling. It serves as a complementary element to the main narrative, directing the listener's attention during pivotal moments by underscoring the relative significance of specific narrative units. Akinsanya and Bach (2014) defined evaluation as the narrative component revealing the narrator's emotions and attitudes at the time the story unfolds.

Factor 6 (Coda). Coda clauses signify the conclusion of stories, allowing the author to connect the story's ending with the present moment.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose of this study is to infer the teacher narratives from their assignments in a far-flung school as well as from their sharing of experiences, difficulties, coping strategies, and realizations. Because of their visceral realism in our daily lives, these stories have had a direct impact on who we are (Akinsanya & Bach, 2014). Creswell (2013) asserts that the advantages of this research far outweigh the drawbacks. To guarantee that both the expected and unexpected hazards would be suitably addressed, ethical measures were implemented.

Consent. The researchers sought the approval of the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS), Public Schools District Supervisor (PSDS), and School Head (SHs) to conduct the written interview with the teachers. Furthermore, the PSDS and SH assisted the researchers in identifying the study participants and made them sign an informed consent form. Teachers can sign the informed consent form on paper if they agree to take part. This factor took into account the teachers' reluctance to participate in the study.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. To safeguard the anonymity of schools and respondents, pseudonyms were employed. Consent forms were issued to potential participants, providing additional assurances about the confidentiality of the study. Measures were in place to prevent any association between the participants and the study or their pseudonyms.

Data Security. Signed consent forms, formal responses, interview transcripts, and recordings were securely stored in a folder and on a password-protected computer, ensuring both printed and digital copies were safeguarded. Printed interview copies would be shredded, and digital files would be deleted five (5) years after publication.

Results and Discussion

Ten teachers shared their stories about facing challenges in remote schools, discussing how they dealt with and triumphed over them, and reflecting on what they learned.

Orientation

Researchers aim to capture the evolving experiences of teachers in remote schools by initiating narrative collection early in their tenure. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of their challenges, coping strategies, and realizations over time. However, the timing may vary depending on research goals and teachers' assignment durations.

Complication Action

Researchers plan to start gathering teachers' stories early on in their tenure at remote schools to fully grasp the evolving nature of their challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights. Timing may vary based on research goals and the duration of teachers' assignments. She wrote, "*Being a teacher in a far-clung school is very challenging. There are a lot of challenges I encountered, and here are just a few of them. First, I must leave my daughter with a heavy heart every Monday because I need to stay in school for the next 5 days since the*

school is too far and will take about 3 hours of travel. Second, our lives are always at risk while on the way to school. The road is so rough and bumpy along the hillside that if the "habal-habal" (motorcycle taxi) drivers make the wrong move while driving, we may encounter an accident. We also need to cross a big river that is too dangerous during rainy days. Third is the communication problem; our school is located in an area with no electricity and no internet connections. In our work nowadays, where most of the reports are ASAP, these two are very necessary. Fourth, most of our salaries go to our transportation expenses. Since our school is too far and the road is too difficult, the transportation is also too high."

Far-flung Teacher 2 and Far-flung Teacher 3 had similar experiences. Far-flung Teacher 2 wrote *"I encountered so many challenges teaching in a far-flung school, like reaching school and riding in a "habalhabal", which is not easy, especially during the rainy season. I traveled 1 hour to reach the school, passing through the mountain ranges. Sometimes I can come to school wet from the rain, or the "habalhabal" that I have ridden on was on a flat tire."*

Far-flung Teacher 3 stated *"I encountered so many challenges teaching in a far-flung school, as a new teacher at that time it was difficult. Commuting to that school was hard, from the city you have to ride in a bus that took me 1 hour and a half, and from the barrio, I had to ride "habal-habal" to reach that school, there was only one (1) "habal-habal" available that time so I have to walk three (3) kilometers if I miss the early trip. With this, I decided to stay in the boarding house near our school."*

Other than the difficulties they encountered in going to the schools where they were assigned, the participants also shared the hardships they faced during bad weather, the lack of basic facilities, the absence of power supply, etc.

Resolution

Despite the challenges encountered by the participants, they did not give up. They incorporated strategies to help them thrive in far-flung teaching environments. For instance, Far-flung Teacher 1 said, *"For the first challenge, I just need to accept the fact that God has a purpose for sending me to this school. I used my daughter as an inspiration and motivation to work better and serve my pupils well. For the second challenge in which our lives are always at risk, there is no better way to cope with it than to pray for safety. By God's grace, he always protects me, and for eight (8) years, I haven't encountered a major accident so far. Big thanks to our drivers, who are always very careful and make sure that we arrive and leave safely. They were also always with us when the big river was flooding. The people in the community are also helping us cross the river. For the third challenge mentioned, to meet all the requirements, the school head sacrifices spending money to be home every day just to be updated. When there are reports, she's the one who submits them and complies with them as much as possible. For the last-mentioned challenge, we made sure that we submitted the correct data in the EBEIS to be included in schools with Special Hardship Allowance. That way, not all, of our transportation expenses will be refunded."*

Far-flung Teacher 2 also shared her coping strategies. She said, *"Coping with those challenges is to accept reality and love my work, for this is my bread and butter for my family. When riding a "habal-habal" during the rainy season, I wear a raincoat and bring clothes to school. If it is wet, I can change my clothes. As I traveled along the mountain ranges, I enjoyed the view, listening to the wind as it whispered and hearing the chirping of the birds. If sometimes the "habal-habal" is on a flat tire, I walk to school. Since the school has limited resources, like textbooks, I will burn my candle to research on the internet in the town just to provide the quality education that I can provide to my students. When I went home, I could update myself on the different memoranda and activities in the district. With regards to water supply, the school has a rainwater catchment for us to use. The dilapidated school buildings are slowly being repaired through the school MOOE. For me not to get easily sick, I wear a hooded jacket so that my sinusitis will be prevented from occurring, and I love the scenery and fresh air around me. Concerning students' attitudes, I always motivated and inspired them by giving examples of good virtues and ethics. I need to model myself first and respect them for who they are. When students are absent from my class, I find time to visit their homes and bring something good for them to eat. I encourage them to come back to school to attend classes regularly, and I always tell them the importance of education in their lives. I also encouraged the parents to be involved in school activities behind their busy schedules in their farming. I advocated and collaborated with the barangay officials for their paramount support in school for the welfare of the students in addressing long-term challenges."*

Similar to the initial two participants, the others found ways to conquer challenges by embracing the nature of their role as educators, being resourceful, devising innovative solutions to provide quality education within limitations, and fostering strong ties within the local community.

Evaluation

The compelling narratives of these ten teachers recounting their challenges in remote schools, their resilience amidst adversity, and the unique hurdles they face in commuting, often on risky "habal-habal" rides through rough terrain, are both awe-inspiring and moving. They endure daily journeys of one to three hours, traversing perilous rivers during the rainy season, and enduring separation from their families for five days a week due to communication challenges and lack of internet access. Teaching in such remote areas means contending with limited amenities like electricity and water supply, and even resorting to traditional methods like "Harana" for communication. Despite these hardships, the teachers find solace in the eagerness of their students to learn and bring their unique strengths to the classroom each day. Yet, they also face challenges within the school environment, including students' attitudes influenced by familial and community dynamics, compounded by transportation difficulties for students and limited parental

involvement due to work commitments. Despite the sacrifices demanded by teaching in remote areas, these teachers remain dedicated and committed, shaping the future of their students and communities, earning them the title of "Dakilang Guro" or "Great Teacher."

Coda

The teachers' personal narratives were categorized into three themes: "Navigating the Wilderness: Challenges of Teaching in Remote Areas," "Strategies for Success in Remote Teaching Environments," and "Beyond Borders: Insights and Rewards of Teaching in Remote Areas." The first theme detailed the challenges teachers faced, including transportation difficulties, lack of electricity and internet access, separation from loved ones, and communication issues with the community. These challenges hindered their effectiveness at work. The second theme highlighted teachers' resilience and creativity in overcoming obstacles. The final theme explored the insights and personal growth gained from their experiences.

Conclusion

The study found that teachers in remote schools encounter various challenges—physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially—such as navigating rough transportation, coping with isolated communities, and managing diverse learners. Despite these hurdles, teachers demonstrate resilience by adapting creatively and resourcefully to meet the needs of students and communities with limited resources. The research highlights teachers' deep commitment to their profession, showing that teaching in remote areas is not just about imparting academic knowledge but also about making a transformative impact on individuals and communities.

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