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## Research Article

### The Chronicles of Far-Flung Teachers Teaching Subanen Learners: A Phenomenology

Anna D. Dagumo

*Southern Capital Colleges, Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines*

#### ABSTRACT

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\*Corresponding Author:

[anna.dagumo@deped.gov.ph](mailto:anna.dagumo@deped.gov.ph)

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This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of far-flung public-school teachers teaching Subanen learners in Calamba District, Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025-2026. Using a Husserlian phenomenological approach and purposive sampling, ten teachers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed experiences shaped by geographical isolation, cultural and linguistic diversity, resource and instructional constraints, strong teacher commitment, and community engagement. Major instructional challenges included difficult terrain and transportation, language and communication barriers, inadequate facilities and technology, cultural contextualization demands, and heavy professional workloads. Teachers responded through culturally responsive and adaptive teaching, improvisation of locally available materials, community collaboration, personal resilience and time management, and professional support networks. The findings underscore the need for stronger institutional support, improved infrastructure and resources, sustained Indigenous Peoples Education training, and school-community partnerships in geographically isolated and indigenous settings.

**Keywords:** community engagement, culturally responsive teaching, far-flung schools, indigenous education, phenomenology, teacher resilience

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## Introduction

Teaching in far-flung communities is an educational equity issue shaped by distance, infrastructure, resource distribution, and the social realities of remote communities. International literature recognizes that teachers in rural and indigenous settings often assume responsibilities beyond classroom instruction and work under conditions where access to basic services and professional support is limited (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). These conditions make teachers' lived experiences important in understanding how inclusive education is actually delivered in geographically isolated contexts.

In the Philippines, far-flung teaching is closely associated with Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) and Last Mile Schools. Teachers assigned to these schools frequently serve Indigenous Peoples learners whose educational experiences are influenced by language, culture, livelihood, and geographic isolation. The Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program seeks to make basic education responsive to indigenous knowledge systems, practices, and identities, yet gaps in resources, professional preparation, and localized implementation remain (Department of Education, 2020; Department of Education, 2021).

Recent literature describes remote teaching as both demanding and transformative. Difficult terrain, unreliable transportation, shortages of instructional materials, limited technology, and cultural-linguistic adjustment can complicate daily teaching. At the same time, teachers in such settings often develop adaptability, resourcefulness, resilience, and a strong commitment to learners (Dela Cruz & Javier, 2020; Santos & Bautista, 2022). These experiences suggest that teaching quality in far-flung communities cannot be understood only through curriculum standards; it must also be examined through the realities teachers negotiate every day.

The need for culturally responsive teaching is particularly important when teachers serve Indigenous learners. Culture and language influence how learners interpret classroom communication, connect new concepts to prior knowledge, and participate in school. Culturally responsive teaching calls for the integration of learners' cultural identities, local experiences, language, and community knowledge into instruction (Gay, 2010; Ramos & Abad, 2023). In the Philippine IPEd context, teachers become cultural mediators who bridge formal schooling and indigenous knowledge systems.

The Subanen communities of Misamis Occidental provide a specific context in which these issues converge. Teachers assigned to far-flung schools in Calamba District encounter not only geographic isolation but also the responsibility of making instruction meaningful for learners whose language and cultural practices may differ from their own. The thesis identifies a localized evidence gap: while policies and general studies discuss GIDA schools and indigenous education, fewer phenomenological inquiries foreground the voices of teachers working specifically with Subanen learners in this district.

The study is grounded primarily in Husserlian phenomenology, which seeks to describe the essence of lived experience through participants' conscious accounts while using bracketing to reduce the influence of researcher preconceptions. The study also draws on ecological and culturally responsive perspectives to understand how classroom, community, institutional, and cultural conditions interact in shaping teachers' experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gay, 2010).

This framing is consistent with the national policy environment. Republic Act No. 8371 recognizes the rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities, including culturally appropriate education; DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011 establishes the National Indigenous Peoples Education Policy Framework; and DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2015 adopts the Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework. Together, these policies emphasize culturally grounded and equitable education, but their effectiveness depends substantially on the support available to teachers at the school and community levels.

Accordingly, the study explored the lived experiences of far-flung teachers teaching Subanen learners in Calamba District, Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025-2026. It examined their lived experiences, the challenges they encounter in delivering instruction, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the recommendations that can be drawn from their narratives. By centering teachers' voices, the study aimed to provide context-specific evidence that can strengthen teacher support systems, culturally responsive practice, and implementation of Indigenous Peoples Education in remote communities.

## Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design using a Husserlian phenomenological approach to understand and describe the essence of far-flung teachers' lived experiences in teaching Subanen learners. The research was conducted in selected far-flung public schools in Calamba District, Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025-2026. Ten teachers were purposively selected because they had direct and relevant experience teaching Subanen learners in geographically isolated settings. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a validated interview guide. With participants' permission, narratives were documented and prepared for analysis. The researcher applied phenomenological reduction and thematic analysis, moving from significant statements and initial codes to recurring patterns and themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework guided the systematic identification, review, and interpretation of themes. Ethical safeguards included research ethics approval, informed consent, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, use of aliases, secure handling of data, and adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The study was delimited to teachers' perspectives in selected schools in Calamba District and did not directly include learners, parents, or other stakeholders; therefore, the findings provide contextual rather than statistical generalization.

## Results and Discussions

The thematic analysis organized the findings into three major areas: the lived experiences of far-flung teachers, the challenges encountered in delivering instruction to Subanen learners, and the coping mechanisms used to sustain teaching in geographically isolated and indigenous contexts. Across these areas, the narratives consistently connected geography, culture, resources, professional commitment, and community relationships.

### *Lived Experiences of Far-Flung Teachers*

The first major area showed that far-flung teaching is a complex experience shaped by five interrelated themes: geographical isolation and accessibility challenges; cultural and linguistic diversity in instruction; resource and instructional constraints; teacher commitment and sense of purpose; and community engagement and cultural immersion. These themes indicate that the teachers' experiences are simultaneously environmental, instructional, relational, and personal rather than being reducible to a single problem.

Cultural and linguistic diversity strongly influenced classroom interaction. Teachers reported that many learners spoke Subanen and could have difficulty understanding lessons delivered in Filipino or English. This required teachers to translate, simplify instructions, and modify teaching approaches. One participant explained, "Many of my students speak the Subanen language, and sometimes they find it difficult to understand lessons delivered in Filipino or English" (P1). Another stated, "There are times when I need to translate or simplify my instructions because of the language gap" (P5). These experiences support the importance of language-responsive and culturally grounded instruction in Indigenous settings (Flores, 2020; Ramos & Abad, 2023).

*"I try to connect my lessons to the students' daily experiences so they can understand better." (P3)*

*"Using examples from their culture helps them relate more to the lesson." (P7)*

Contextualization became a practical response to cultural and linguistic differences. Teachers connected lessons with learners' daily experiences and adjusted methods to fit local realities. This reflects culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the meaningful integration of learners' cultural backgrounds into instruction (Gay, 2010). The narratives suggest that cultural competence is developed not only through formal preparation but also through repeated interaction with learners and communities.

Resource scarcity also formed part of teachers' everyday experience. Participants reported shortages of instructional materials, limited technology, inadequate facilities, and the need to improvise. One teacher stated, "We do not always have enough instructional materials, so I have to adjust my teaching using whatever is available" (P1). Another explained, "I create my own teaching materials using locally available resources so that my students can better understand the lesson" (P3). These accounts demonstrate how resource limitations shape pedagogy while simultaneously eliciting teacher creativity.

Despite the difficult conditions, teacher commitment and sense of purpose emerged as a defining feature of the lived experience. Participants described staying because learners depended on them and because teaching in the

community was meaningful. One teacher said, “Even though the situation is challenging, I remain committed because I know that my students depend on me for their education” (P1). Another shared, “There are many challenges, but I choose to stay because I believe my presence here makes a difference” (P2). Such narratives are consistent with literature linking resilience with professional purpose and commitment in demanding contexts (Day & Gu, 2020; Reyes, 2022).

*“Serving in a far-flung area is not easy, but it is fulfilling because I know I am helping the community.” (P9)*  
*“Seeing my students learn and succeed motivates me to continue despite the hardships.” (P6)*

The teachers’ sense of purpose extended beyond academic instruction. Participants viewed education as a means of improving learners’ futures and supporting community development. This meaning-making helps explain why teachers persisted despite structural constraints. Phenomenologically, hardship and fulfillment coexisted: the same environment that imposed physical and professional burdens also gave teachers a strong sense of contribution and social value (Villanueva, 2023).

Community engagement and cultural immersion further enriched the experience. Teachers deliberately built relationships with learners, parents, and community members to establish trust and understand local practices. One participant said, “I make an effort to connect with the community so that they can trust me as a teacher” (P5). Another explained, “I communicate with parents to understand the needs of my students and how I can support them better” (P2). These relationships helped teachers contextualize instruction and respond to concerns affecting learners beyond the classroom.

*“I make sure to respect their culture and traditions because it is part of their identity.” (P3)*

The findings therefore portray far-flung teaching as a process of professional and cultural immersion. Teachers do not simply deliver a national curriculum in a remote location; they continuously negotiate access, language, material constraints, community relationships, and their own professional identity. This aligns with the IPed framework’s emphasis on community participation and cultural respect (Department of Education, 2011; Department of Education, 2015).

### *Challenges Encountered in Delivering Instruction*

The second major area identified five challenge themes: geographical isolation and accessibility barriers; language and communication barriers; resource and infrastructure limitations; cultural sensitivity and contextualization challenges; and workload and professional demands. The findings show that these barriers overlap and can intensify one another, producing a teaching environment in which instructional decisions are affected by conditions beyond the classroom.

Geographical isolation was a persistent barrier. Teachers described remote school locations, rugged terrain, limited transportation, long travel time, and exposure to environmental risks. One participant stated, “The school is very far, and the road is difficult, especially during rainy days” (P1). Another reported, “Reaching the school requires crossing rivers and walking long distances” (P3). These accounts show that distance is not merely geographic; it affects punctuality, fatigue, safety, and the movement of instructional materials. This is consistent with reports that remote schools experience compounded access and service-delivery constraints (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2021).

*“There are no regular means of transportation, so I have to walk for hours.” (P2)*  
*“During heavy rain, the roads become dangerous and difficult to pass.” (P4)*

Environmental risks further increased the vulnerability of teachers. Participants mentioned flooding, slippery paths, landslides, and strong river currents. These conditions can interrupt schooling and affect both teacher and learner attendance. The findings support the view that far-flung education requires policies designed around geographic realities rather than uniform assumptions about school access (Department of Education, 2022a; EDCOM II, 2024).

Language and communication barriers were equally significant. Differences between teachers' language and learners' Subanen language sometimes reduced comprehension and required translation or code-switching. Cultural interpretation also influenced communication; teachers learned that hesitation or different response patterns could reflect cultural norms rather than lack of ability. This finding reinforces the need for language-responsive and culturally sensitive pedagogy in Indigenous classrooms (Cruz & Padilla, 2021; Ramos & Abad, 2023).

Resource and infrastructure limitations constrained the range of instructional strategies teachers could use. The study identified shortages of learning materials, inadequate classrooms and facilities, limited access to technology and electricity, and scarcity of culturally relevant materials. One participant explained, "We have very limited access to technology, so we cannot use digital tools that could enhance learning" (P2). Another stated, "Most of our teaching is done using traditional methods because there are no available technological resources" (P6). These accounts reflect the broader digital and material inequalities experienced by remote schools (Department of Education, 2022b; EDCOM II, 2024).

Cultural sensitivity and contextualization were challenges because teachers needed to reconcile curriculum expectations with local values, beliefs, traditions, and learners' lived experiences. Participants recognized that instruction had to be adapted rather than simply transferred from mainstream settings. The need to understand local culture placed additional demands on teachers who entered Indigenous communities with limited formal preparation. The literature similarly notes that culturally responsive teaching depends on both teacher knowledge and sustained community engagement (Flores, 2020; Ramos & Abad, 2023).

Workload and professional demands added another layer of difficulty. Teachers in far-flung schools may handle multigrade or diverse classes, administrative reporting, school maintenance, community coordination, and other responsibilities while having limited access to professional development. The study found that these overlapping demands can contribute to fatigue and restrict opportunities for training. This pattern is consistent with literature describing role expansion and professional isolation among teachers in remote settings (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

Importantly, the challenges were interconnected. Difficult access affected the delivery of materials and participation in training; resource scarcity increased the need for teacher improvisation; language and cultural differences increased the need for contextualization; and workload reduced the time available for professional learning. The findings therefore frame the difficulties as systemic and contextual rather than as shortcomings of individual teachers.

This interpretation has implications for school leadership and policy. Supporting teachers in far-flung Indigenous schools requires more than encouraging resilience. It requires practical measures that reduce avoidable burdens: safer access, adequate learning resources, culturally relevant materials, reliable technology where feasible, professional learning opportunities, and responsive supervision. Without such institutional support, teachers are left to compensate personally for structural gaps.

### *Coping Mechanisms of Far-Flung Teachers*

The third major area identified five coping themes: culturally responsive and adaptive teaching practices; resourcefulness and instructional innovation; community engagement and support systems; personal management and resilience strategies; and professional collaboration and support networks. These coping mechanisms show that teachers actively reconstruct their practice in response to the realities of far-flung schooling.

Culturally responsive and adaptive teaching was a central coping strategy. Teachers contextualized lessons, integrated Indigenous knowledge and local examples, used the mother tongue and code-switching, and modified lessons according to learners' circumstances. One participant explained, "I make sure that my lessons are connected to their daily lives, such as farming activities or community practices, so that they can easily understand the concepts. When lessons are contextualized, students become more interested and participate more actively in class" (P3). This strategy aligns with culturally responsive teaching principles and with IPED's culture-based orientation (Gay, 2010; Department of Education, 2015).

Resourcefulness and instructional innovation allowed teachers to continue teaching despite shortages. Participants created or adapted learning materials from locally available resources and used community examples when commercial or digital materials were unavailable. This improvisation did not eliminate resource gaps, but it enabled teachers to preserve lesson relevance and learner engagement. The findings echo literature showing that teachers in difficult environments rely on flexible planning and resource improvisation as professional coping strategies (UNESCO, 2020; Department of Education, 2022b).

Community engagement functioned as both an instructional and social support mechanism. Relationships with parents, elders, and local stakeholders helped teachers understand learner needs, gain cultural knowledge, and mobilize assistance. The study's narratives suggest that trust made communication easier and strengthened shared responsibility for learners. This is consistent with research emphasizing school-community relationships as a source of resilience in Indigenous contexts (Flores, 2020; Ramos & Abad, 2023).

Personal management and resilience strategies helped teachers manage the emotional and practical demands of their assignments. Time management, prioritization, patience, flexibility, perseverance, and emotional regulation were important because teachers had to balance classroom responsibilities with travel, administrative work, and community-related duties. The thesis situates these strategies within the broader literature on teacher resilience, which emphasizes ongoing adaptation rather than a one-time response to adversity (Day & Gu, 2020; Santos, 2021).

Meaning-making also strengthened persistence. Teachers' commitment was sustained by the belief that their presence mattered to learners and communities. When teachers interpreted hardship through a service-oriented and learner-centered purpose, difficulties could be reframed as part of meaningful professional work. This does not remove the need for institutional support, but it helps explain how teachers maintain motivation in settings where external resources are limited (Reyes, 2022; Villanueva, 2023).

Professional collaboration and support networks provided another important coping mechanism. Teachers sought assistance from colleagues and school leaders, participated in available trainings and peer learning, shared strategies, and valued mentoring. One participant stated, "Mentoring from more experienced teachers helps me understand how to handle different situations in the classroom, especially in dealing with diverse learners" (P3). Another explained that guidance from school leaders and senior teachers improved confidence and teaching practice (P1).

These collaborative practices are consistent with literature emphasizing collective expertise and professional learning communities. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2020), as cited in the thesis discussion, describe collaborative professionalism as a means of strengthening shared responsibility and teaching practice. The thesis also relates the finding to OECD (2021) and UNESCO (2020), which emphasize collaboration, mentoring, and peer support in challenging educational contexts.

Taken together, the coping mechanisms demonstrate teacher agency. Far-flung teachers do not passively endure constraints; they adapt instruction, create materials, draw on community relationships, manage themselves, and seek professional support. Yet the findings also make clear that personal resilience should complement—not replace—systemic support. Sustainable improvement requires institutions to reduce structural barriers while strengthening the adaptive practices teachers have already developed.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that the lived experiences of far-flung teachers teaching Subanen learners in Calamba District are shaped by the interaction of geography, culture, language, resources, professional demands, and community relationships. Difficult terrain, transportation constraints, language barriers, inadequate materials and facilities, and heavy workloads complicate instructional delivery. At the same time, teachers demonstrate commitment, adaptability, resourcefulness, and a strong sense of purpose in serving Indigenous learners.

Culturally responsive teaching, contextualization, use of familiar language, improvisation of local materials, community engagement, personal resilience, and professional collaboration enable teachers to sustain meaningful learning despite difficult conditions. These practices show that teacher effectiveness in far-flung Indigenous settings depends not only on individual competence but also on the ability to connect formal

schooling with learners' cultural and community realities. The findings therefore support stronger institutional, professional, and policy support for teachers working in geographically isolated and Indigenous contexts.

### Recommendations

Far-flung teachers should continue strengthening culturally responsive and context-sensitive instruction by integrating Indigenous knowledge, language, and local experiences into lessons and by engaging in reflective practice, peer collaboration, and professional development related to Indigenous Peoples Education and multigrade teaching. Subanen learners should be provided with inclusive and culturally meaningful learning opportunities that affirm their identity, language, and traditions. School heads should prioritize instructional resources, school facilities, teacher well-being, responsive monitoring, and continuous professional learning. DepEd officials should strengthen IPed and Last Mile Schools initiatives through sufficient funding, equitable resource allocation, culturally relevant training, and practical support for teachers in GIDA schools. Policymakers and education planners should consider workload management, incentives, transportation and infrastructure needs, and access to technology in designing programs for remote schools. Parents, elders, and community stakeholders should be engaged as partners in contextualization, cultural learning, and learner support. Future researchers may include learners, parents, school leaders, and other districts to deepen understanding of Indigenous education across settings.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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