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Stories of Struggles and Survival: A Narrative Study of Teachers in a Last Mile School

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored and documented the lived experiences of teachers assigned in last-mile schools, specifically at Sebucal Integrated School, Oroquieta City Division, during the School Year 2025–2026. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study examined teachers' personal challenges, professional struggles, coping strategies, and recommendations for improving support systems in geographically isolated school contexts. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers who had direct experience in last-mile teaching. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was used to analyze the narratives. Findings revealed that teachers faced severe physical, emotional, and professional challenges due to geographical isolation, limited resources, multigrade instruction, and weak institutional support. Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrated resilience through advance preparation, instructional flexibility, peer collaboration, community integration, and reliance on faith and self-care. The study concludes that systemic support is essential to sustain teacher well-being and instructional quality in last-mile schools and recommends improvements in infrastructure, welfare, professional development, and learner-centered support programs.

Keywords: coping strategies, educational equity, last-mile schools, phenomenological study, teachers' lived experiences

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Introduction

Around the world, teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas face unique challenges that test their resilience and professional commitment. According to education UNESCO, 2021 revealed that teachers in remote schools often struggle with poor infrastructure, minimal instructional materials, lack of connectivity, and high rates of teacher turnover, yet they remain central to ensuring equitable access to education. Narrative inquiry has become a useful lens in studying these realities, allowing researchers to capture teachers' lived experiences as stories of struggles and triumphs that are often overlooked by policy and official reports (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020). In the Philippine context, the Department of Education recognizes the importance of addressing the needs of "last mile schools," which are defined as those located in geographically isolated, disadvantaged, and conflict-affected areas, with limited or no access to basic services. These schools represent the frontier of the Philippine educational system's commitment to inclusivity, and the narratives of their teachers embody the struggle to bring quality education where it is most difficult.

Lingo and Garcia (2024) categorized teachers' experiences in remote schools under themes such as "laborious workload," "far and uneasy road," "distance from family," and "sense of isolation," showing that geographical realities greatly affect teachers' personal and professional lives. Despite these struggles, teachers' survival strategies, such as prayer, maintaining a positive outlook, and relying on the camaraderie of colleagues. Similarly, Reyes (2021) noted that teachers in disadvantaged schools often rely on resourcefulness and creativity to compensate for the lack of instructional materials, while at the same time drawing strength from their sense of mission to serve marginalized learners. Bautista (2022) further argued that these experiences must not only be understood as individual stories but also as systemic reflections of how education is delivered in underserved areas, emphasizing the importance of narrative research in capturing teachers' realities. These perspectives serve as a foundation for the present study, which aims to localize and contextualize such findings in the Division of Oroquieta City.

While existing research has begun to shed light on the struggles of teachers in last mile schools across the Philippines, there remains a significant gap in localized studies that focus on the Division of Oroquieta City, particularly Sebucal Integrated School. According to data from the Department of Education (2023), a considerable number of schools in Northern Mindanao still fall under the last mile category, characterized by insufficient classrooms, lack of electricity, poor road access, and limited teacher resources. Reports further indicate that many teachers in these schools are burdened with administrative work on top of teaching loads, sometimes handling multi-grade classes with little instructional support. However, despite such systemic documentation, the lived stories and narratives of teachers in Sebucal Integrated School remain undocumented, leaving a void in understanding how they personally negotiate survival and meaning in their profession. Without these stories, policymakers and stakeholders risk creating solutions that are generic and misaligned with the actual conditions on the ground. This underscores the necessity of a narrative study that explores not just the challenges, but also the strategies and resilience that sustain teachers in Sibucal.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore and document the stories of struggles and survival of teachers in Sebucal Integrated School. Specifically, it seeks to narrate how teachers experience and cope with the realities of working in a last mile school, and how their survival strategies reflect both individual resilience and collective adaptation to difficult circumstances. The objectives of this study include: (1) identifying the common challenges teachers face in Sebucal Integrated School; (2) documenting their coping mechanisms and sources of strength; and (3) analyzing how these narratives can contribute to better understanding the lived realities of last mile teachers in Oroquieta City.

Hence, expected result of the study point to a rich tapestry of narratives that reveal the personal, professional, and social struggles of teachers in Sebucal Integrated School. It is anticipated that teachers will share stories that emphasize the physical hardships of travel, the emotional toll of separation from loved ones, and the professional frustrations of working with scarce resources. At the same time, the study expects to uncover stories of survival—accounts of creativity in teaching, reliance on community support, and the personal meaning they attach to their roles as educators in disadvantaged areas.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of teachers in a last mile school, specifically Sebuca Integrated School in the Division of Oroquieta City during the School Year 2025–2026. Twelve teachers were purposively selected based on their direct experience in the school and participated voluntarily through informed consent. Data were gathered using a validated researcher-made interview guide composed of open-ended questions that examined teachers' personal and professional challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations. The instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure its credibility and relevance. Data collection followed established ethical protocols, including securing approvals from the appropriate authorities, obtaining participants' consent, and maintaining confidentiality. The collected narratives were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Creswell's (2013) seven-step qualitative data analysis process to generate meaningful themes that reflected the realities, resilience, and insights of teachers working in a last mile school setting.

Results and Discussions

Geographical Isolation and Physical Hardship

The findings revealed that geographical isolation and physical hardship were among the most significant personal challenges experienced by teachers assigned to Sebuca Integrated School. Participants described traveling four to six hours on foot through steep mountain trails, crossing multiple rivers, carrying heavy teaching materials and personal supplies, and staying in the community for extended periods because daily travel was impractical. These experiences demonstrate that the demands of teaching in a last mile school extend beyond classroom instruction, as teachers must first overcome physically exhausting and hazardous journeys before fulfilling their professional responsibilities. The remoteness of the school not only drains teachers' physical energy but also affects their emotional readiness, motivation, and overall well-being. Their narratives highlight that geographical isolation is more than a matter of distance; it encompasses limited accessibility, exposure to environmental hazards, and the absence of basic services that make teaching significantly more challenging than in accessible schools. Despite these adversities, teachers continued to report for duty, reflecting their commitment to ensuring that learners in geographically isolated communities receive quality education.

The findings support existing literature emphasizing that teachers assigned to geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) experience greater physical demands and occupational risks than those in urban schools. UNESCO (2020) reported that poor transportation infrastructure, difficult terrain, and limited public services contribute to teacher fatigue, absenteeism, and professional stress in remote communities. Similarly, Mulkeen (2019) noted that the physical hardships associated with remote teaching assignments often reduce teachers' well-being and job satisfaction while increasing the need for institutional support. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education recognizes that teachers in last mile schools face extraordinary challenges that require responsive interventions, including improved transportation assistance, hazard allowances, and infrastructure development. The participants' experiences reinforce these observations, demonstrating that while resilience enables teachers to adapt to difficult conditions, it should not replace adequate institutional support. Addressing geographical barriers through better access roads, transportation facilities, and teacher welfare programs is essential to safeguarding teachers' well-being and sustaining the delivery of quality education in last mile schools.

Limited Access to Instructional Resources and Technology

The findings revealed that limited access to instructional resources and technology is a significant professional challenge for teachers in Sebuca Integrated School. The absence of stable internet connectivity, unreliable electricity, and insufficient instructional materials restrict teachers' ability to implement interactive, technology-enhanced, and learner-centered instruction. Participants explained that they must prepare teaching materials before traveling to the community, rely on printed resources and improvised instructional materials, and modify lessons that require digital technologies. Consequently, teachers expend additional time and effort to compensate for resource limitations, increasing their workload while limiting opportunities to provide innovative learning experiences. These findings demonstrate that geographical isolation affects not only physical access to schools but also teachers' capacity to deliver instruction aligned with the demands of 21st-century education.

The findings corroborate previous studies emphasizing that inadequate digital infrastructure remains one of the

greatest barriers to quality education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. UNESCO (2021) reported that limited internet connectivity and unreliable electricity widen educational inequalities by restricting teachers' access to digital resources, professional learning opportunities, and innovative pedagogical practices. Likewise, Almerich et al. (2016) found that insufficient technological resources reduce teachers' confidence and ability to integrate ICT effectively into classroom instruction. In the Philippine context, David and Albert (2022) observed that schools in geographically isolated communities continue to experience substantial digital disparities, constraining both teaching and learning. Consistent with these studies, the participants' experiences indicate that although teachers demonstrate creativity, flexibility, and resilience through advance preparation and improvisation, these strategies merely compensate for systemic deficiencies rather than resolve them. The findings therefore underscore the need for sustained investments in internet connectivity, reliable electricity, adequate instructional resources, and ICT infrastructure to promote equitable, effective, and technology-supported learning in last mile schools.

Advance Preparation and Resource Management

The findings indicate that advance preparation and resource management are fundamental coping strategies adopted by teachers to address the realities of teaching in a last mile school. Because internet connectivity, electricity, instructional materials, and basic commodities are limited in Sebucal Integrated School, teachers prepare lesson plans, download digital resources, print instructional materials, and secure food and personal necessities before traveling to the community. These proactive practices enable teachers to maintain instructional continuity despite the absence of technological and logistical support. Beyond instructional preparation, participants emphasized the importance of carefully managing available resources throughout their stay, demonstrating that teaching in a geographically isolated school requires not only pedagogical competence but also strong organizational and logistical skills. These findings suggest that teachers' preparedness extends beyond classroom instruction, encompassing the planning necessary for both professional responsibilities and daily survival in a remote setting.

The findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas often rely on proactive planning to compensate for structural limitations. UNESCO (2020) noted that advance preparation is essential in sustaining teaching where access to instructional resources and communication infrastructure is limited. Likewise, Trucano (2015) argued that teachers in remote schools must anticipate instructional needs because opportunities to obtain learning materials after deployment are minimal. In the Philippine context, David and Albert (2022) similarly observed that teachers assigned to last mile schools assume additional logistical responsibilities beyond their instructional roles. While the participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability and commitment, these strategies also reflect systemic inadequacies that transfer institutional responsibilities to individual teachers. Thus, strengthening infrastructure, improving resource provision, and establishing centralized instructional support are necessary to reduce teachers' workload and promote equitable and sustainable education in geographically isolated communities.

Improved Infrastructure and Connectivity

The findings revealed that teachers identified improved infrastructure and connectivity as the highest priority for strengthening educational delivery in last mile schools. Participants consistently recommended the provision of reliable internet connectivity, stable electricity, adequate ICT facilities, and efficient communication systems between schools and the Division Office. These recommendations stem from their experiences of teaching in an environment where limited digital infrastructure restricts instructional innovation, delays administrative communication, and increases teachers' workload. The absence of stable internet and electricity not only limits the integration of technology into classroom instruction but also prevents teachers from accessing updated learning resources, submitting reports on time, and participating in professional learning opportunities. Consequently, teachers viewed improved infrastructure as a prerequisite for enhancing both instructional quality and administrative efficiency in geographically isolated schools.

These findings reinforce previous studies emphasizing that digital infrastructure is fundamental to achieving equitable and quality education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. UNESCO (2021) reported that inadequate internet connectivity and unreliable electricity continue to widen educational inequalities by restricting teachers' access to digital resources, collaboration, and professional development. Likewise, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) argued that access to ICT infrastructure strengthens instructional effectiveness, teacher

productivity, and learner engagement. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education's Last Mile Schools Program recognizes infrastructure development as a critical intervention for improving educational access and quality, while David and Albert (2022) highlighted persistent digital disparities in remote schools. Consistent with these studies, the participants emphasized that investments in internet connectivity, renewable energy, ICT equipment, and communication systems are essential not only to reduce teachers' professional burden but also to ensure that learners in remote communities receive equitable and meaningful educational opportunities.

Conclusions

This study concluded that teaching in a last-mile school such as Sebucal Integrated School is characterized by profound personal, professional, and contextual challenges that extend beyond conventional classroom responsibilities. Teachers faced severe physical, emotional, and psychological demands due to geographical isolation, environmental risks, limited resources, instructional complexity, and weak institutional support systems. Despite these adversities, teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience by employing adaptive coping strategies such as advance preparation, instructional flexibility, peer collaboration, cultural integration, and reliance on personal faith and emotional regulation. Their lived experiences further revealed that sustained effectiveness and well-being in last-mile teaching depend not solely on individual resilience but significantly on systemic support. The study therefore concludes that meaningful improvements in infrastructure, instructional resources, professional development, administrative practices, teacher welfare, and learner-centered support programs are essential to sustaining teacher commitment, enhancing instructional quality, and ensuring equitable education for learners in geographically isolated communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that teachers assigned to last-mile schools continue strengthening their resilience, instructional adaptability, and collaborative practices while education leaders and policymakers provide greater institutional support through improved infrastructure, reliable internet and electricity, enhanced teacher welfare programs, adequate instructional resources, and context-specific professional development. School administrators should foster supportive and responsive school environments by strengthening mentoring, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and communication systems, while local government units and community stakeholders should actively support school initiatives through infrastructure assistance, feeding programs, and resource mobilization. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to expand this line of inquiry by examining last-mile schools in other contexts and evaluating interventions that promote teacher well-being, learner outcomes, and educational equity in geographically isolated communities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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