

TEACHING IN THE FAR-FLUNG SCHOOLS: ENGLISH TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The study identified the lived experiences of English teachers teaching in far-flung schools. It determined the daily experiences, fulfillment, insights, joy, challenges, and coping strategies. A Transcendental Phenomenology was employed to describe their lived experiences. The study used criterion sampling to identify the ten participants from two public schools in South Cotabato, Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather enriching data from the ten volunteered participants. Through Thematic Analysis, the English teachers' lived experiences centered on seven relevant themes: Inevitable daily struggles, Inadequate pedagogical resources, Inaccessibility to schools, Sense of fulfillment, Psychological stress and adaptability, Aspiring employment preference, and, Continual adjustments and initiatives.

Keywords: Far-flung Schools, English Teachers, Lived Experiences, Public Schools.

Introduction

Teaching is a profession that presents many challenges. It is an admirable and noblest profession that demands the collaboration of hearts, minds, and souls. It also requires commitment and passion. Teaching in the Philippines is a more interesting experience. There are many hurdles, and one's devotion can be tested, but if one succeeds, the cream of the crops emerges. Teaching is a vocation. Teaching is the most powerful and influential career. Teachers can unleash the power unrivaled by any other profession.

In some rural areas, teachers work at a disadvantage in many ways. Public teachers are paid poorly and suffer from inadequate classrooms, furniture, supplies, and communication resources. These conditions can be demotivating and counterproductive for the performances of teachers and students. Meanwhile, professional development opportunities were not given, and they tended to isolate themselves from their peers [10]. Most teachers in far-flung indigenous school areas are novices and fresh graduates. They are exposed to urban life, so they probably have no experience in isolated communities [34].

Teachers are the prime personnel in facilitating the teaching-learning process, and learners' learning growth and development. However, far-flung schools in the Philippines still face a shortage of teaching resources, and teachers are constantly

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challenged to provide quality education [35]. The quality of education received by students depends on learning environments and facilitators. Far-flung schools are often deprived of the needed facilities. After teaching more than 200 students a day, teachers must also perform their responsibility to identify their students' backgrounds. The teacher's performance is affected due to various stress and challenges in providing quality education to the poor [12].

Teachers in far-flung areas need to walk kilometers of rough terrain or trek into the mountains to get to school and to teach students [19]. They are given many other administrative tasks than focusing on a teaching role. They get blamed whenever there is a lack of students' required documents. Since this would affect their performance evaluation, teachers would rather spend their own money to help students acquire their lacking documents. Teachers must shoulder their expenses during the home visitation of students who usually live in secluded places. They also shoulder athletes' expenses due to parents' lack of support.

Recent research on teachers in far-flung schools has focused on teachers' teaching strategies [13], teachers' motivations [24], student learning experiences in far-flung locations [9], quality education [25], and obstacles in far-flung learning [26]. Few studies have been undertaken on the lived experiences of English teachers at a far-flung school. Hence, this study aimed to portray the English teachers' lived experiences teaching in far-flung schools.

Statement of The Problem

The study's central question is: *What are the lived experiences of English teachers in teaching in far-flung schools?* It also answered the following sub-questions:

1. What are the daily experiences of English teachers?
2. What are English teachers' insights, fulfilment, joy, and challenges?
3. How do English teachers cope with quality teaching and learning?

Methodology

The study utilized the Transcendental Phenomenological Method. Phenomenology investigates a person's lived experiences. It is based on what was experienced and how it was experienced [17]. The study was centered on English teachers' experiences. It aimed to explain and grasp the sensations being lived through. The research was carried out in two public schools in South Cotabato, Philippines. The participants were ten English teachers who volunteered to be involved in the study. The researchers purposefully selected

the participants using the following inclusion criteria: have served at least two years as an English teacher in a far-flung school, age ranged from 20 to 50 years old, willing to participate and share experiences, and have permanent teaching status.

Moreover, the researchers employed semi-structured interviews. Data were collected through face-to-face, phone, and video conferencing. The researchers used Smartphone recordings for documentation. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the principals and school heads. The same permission and consent were obtained from the English-teacher participants. Orientation was conducted on the protocols of the interviews. The participants were given pseudonyms. They could withdraw at any moment during the interview. The data were kept with the utmost confidentiality. Transcription writing followed, then the transcripts were returned to the participants for validation and confirmation.

Thematic Analysis (TA) was employed [6, 22]. The TA was also employed in various qualitative studies [27, 30, 23, 5,4]. The researchers familiarized the transcripts by repetitive reading and indulged with the participants' responses. It was followed by identifying meaningful statements (MSs). The MSs were coded based on the similarities of the ideas and responses. Then, the initial themes (ITs) were formulated based on the coded data. Sets of ideas were grouped. The clustered themes (CTs) were based on the similarities of data sets from the IT. Theme reviews were also conducted to verify and validate the procedure and the naming of corresponding themes. Then, based on CTs, the relevant themes (RTs) were identified. The RTs represent and characterize the lived experiences of English teachers in far-flung schools. Likewise, the results of the TA were given to the participants for validation.

Results and Discussion

Seven (7) relevant themes were formulated through rigorous TA. These represent the challenges and barriers, psychological and emotional concerns, and coping mechanisms of far-flung English teachers. They are Inevitable daily struggles, Inadequate pedagogical resources, Inaccessibility to schools, Sense of fulfillment, Psychological stress and adaptability, Aspiring employment preference, and, Continual adjustments and initiatives.

Theme 1: Inevitable daily struggles

This theme focuses on the challenges and barriers to service encountered by English teachers in far-flung schools. Teachers voiced their displeasure at

being separated from their families. Social isolation is a factor in non-metropolitan personnel shortages. Living in two vastly different environments can lead to feelings of dislocation or alienation [29].

In an everyday setting, English teachers encounter similar problems. They have difficulty communicating and building harmonious connections among the students, parents, and community people in the narratives because of linguistic limitations and the area's culture and customs. They have also been involved in potentially life-threatening occurrences while serving. They are continually burdened with reports, load work, and assigned duties rather than focusing on teaching and imparting knowledge to students who thirst for quality education.

Teachers assigned to teach in far-flung locations and new to the community must understand the community's culture, beliefs, customs, and linguistic disparities to successfully educate and interact with the learners and the community [28]. The following are the participants' responses:

"Since I am *Bisaya* and they are *Blaans*, we do not understand each other during the giving and retrieval of the modules. Before reaching the school site, sometimes we encountered civil conflict within the community, and language differences were also evident (P1, P3)." "In the new normal, teaching them reading and writing is difficult. Teachers cannot purchase materials needed for teaching because we are on the hill. Travelling cost energy. We end up tired. The roads are risky and prone to a landslide. Inevitably, the road is becoming accident-prone (P2, P9)."

"Another challenge is their attitude influenced by their culture, such as how they act, especially their way of communication. Most of the time, they were shouting. Students were demotivated to do homework, which compelled visitation at their homes for anecdotal records and to help them accomplish their modules (P4, P6)."

Theme 2: Inadequate pedagogical resources

This theme focuses on the lack of facilities and learning materials. Participants faced difficulties and challenges in providing quality education to the students due to the inaccessibility and supply of learning facilities and materials. Educational resources have a favorable impact on students' academic achievement. Quality school facilities should always be available for teachers to do their tasks and assist students in learning and achieving efficiently [20].

Consequently, a shortage of resources in the classroom may be extremely stressful for both

students and teachers. Not only are students and teachers in misery, but they are also unable to study to their full capacity due to a lack of resources. With such urgent difficulties in schools, parents may begin to question the school's credibility, and they may start to wonder if their children are receiving the attention or help they require [15]. The following are the participants' responses:

"Our school is far-flung, and learning resources are limited at the top of the mountain. It is hard for students to achieve a quality education. We lack classrooms at all levels. Students use covered courts (P2, P8)."

"Now, our schools lack facilities like a teacher's table, books, and other teaching materials. We conduct teaching at churches because typhoons damaged our school building. School supplies are limited, especially the chalkboard, chairs, and other instructional materials (P3, P7)."

Theme 3: Inaccessibility to schools

On this theme, the participants expressed how the schools' location affects their everyday situations and services. The schools are located on the top of the hill, and sometimes it takes an hour or two to reach the station. Locales are made up of all the factors around man and influence him. These characteristics include physical, biological, and social aspects. Location may also be considered a sum of all the external conditions and factors affecting life and growth [1].

Furthermore, the school environment may be regarded as a second teacher since space can arrange and develop pleasant connections between people of various ages, give changes, encourage choices and activities, and stimulate multiple sorts of social and affective learning [18]. The following are the translated responses of the participants:

"*Datal Biao* is far. We cannot travel daily, so we travel every Monday, and we go home on Thursday or Friday (P1)." "When it comes to the location, of course, it is far, and the school is on the hill, so the challenge is that every week, we travel to school and go up to the mountains. For example, when it rains, we must walk on a sloping road for two hours (P3, P7)."

"The road to school has rocks. Roads were damaged because of landslides. There is soil erosion in the area. The climate is hot, and sometimes it rains, so it is difficult. The terrain going to school is dangerous because there are few nearby houses (P8, P9)."

Theme 4: Sense of fulfillment

Theme 4 centered on English teachers' fulfillment. They expressed happiness when they achieved something and received compliments from

colleagues, students, parents, and the community. The English teachers are revered and fully supported in the community. They felt fulfilled as their students learned, appreciated their efforts, and expressed how the students and parents remembered and invited them to celebrations. People who are satisfied with themselves and their life experiences are more likely to provide healthy living circumstances in a sample of other teachers. It is about the role of situational personal satisfaction in predicting health [21]. Furthermore, teachers' satisfaction influences students' performance and learning processes [31].

"I think of joy towards my colleagues. I felt like a family. I am happy because of my respectful students. In isolated areas, parents are supportive, kind, and thoughtful. We do not feel pressure. They see us as the second parents of their children (P3, P7, P2)."

"I am happy whenever my students learn reading and writing. I feel happy and fulfilled when knowledge and skills are evident to the students. Even though the road is challenging, the panoramic views of the mountains are rejuvenating, and you can breathe fresh air. When we reach the community, they are happy and show a welcoming spirit (P1, P9, P8)."

Theme 5: Psychological stress and adaptability

This theme evolves on the teachers' anxiety, stress, and adaptability in far-flung schools. These issues affect mental health, commitment, and services. These challenges that the participants have encountered have caused some to accept and become resilient in their current situation and setting. Some participants are motivated to stay and become effective in their chosen vocations to help more elusive students.

Accordingly, starting teachers should enter the field with all children's mental health competencies offered by their pre-service training. With professional experience, they will build a fuller insight into how to better apply their skills in the field [33]. Studies have indicated that teachers are vulnerable to excessive stress and burnout. They have a challenging and complex job that needs daily balancing of intellectual, social, and emotional concerns, putting them in one of the most difficult working conditions [7]. Many teachers cite gaps in professional training in classroom management, even though these abilities are critical to their careers. The following are the shared experiences of the participants:

"Since the school is far from home and the community has a different culture, you cannot express yourself. We also have experienced threats in school. Teaching in a far-flung school is tiring and frustrating. I choose to resign, but I think about how my

family would be since I am the provider (P1, P7)." "My school is demotivating, lacks facilities, and is dull. It does not encourage learners to study. Whenever there is an armed conflict in the community, teachers cannot report for two months (P1, P5)."

"It does not affect me psychologically. I consider it inspiration, and we need adaptation in our teaching assignments. There are challenges, but seeing the students' and communities' situations uplift your courage to teach. Worries are eventually gone. It does not affect me (P9, P3)."

Theme 6: Aspiring employment preference

This theme focuses on English teachers' perspectives on being reassigned to urban schools in the province. Most participants mentioned having a hard time in far-flung schools. They wish to be reassigned to urban schools and communities. However, two participants expressed interest and willingness to stay and continue their service in their far-flung schools.

Teachers who had engaged in an education program with a specific focus on the urban setting, such as through interning at urban schools, felt more prepared to work in an urban environment [16]. There is a need for education programs that focus on urban contexts to vigorously nurture possibilities for teacher-learners in their schedules to see the rich opportunities of these schools and communities [11]. Learning from experience creates a connection between what a person can do, enjoy, and suffer. Reflection is associated with experience and learning. When reflection is nurtured, experience, learning, and reflection become purposeful [2]. The following are the participants' responses:

"I rendered 3 years of service. With a reassignment, I can go home daily and care for my children and parents (P1, P2, P4)."

"Based on my interest, I will stay because I want to help indigenous learners. I care for students since they are marginalized. I wish to see them graduate from college. It continuously inspires me to stay. I also consider my school heads (P7, P9)."

Theme 7: Continual adjustments and initiatives

Theme 7 centered on English teachers' coping mechanisms to provide quality education. Most of them experienced difficulties and challenges differently. Teachers employed their coping mechanisms despite the problems and challenges they encountered. Quality education is one of the pressing challenges that teachers experience in the area. With this, they employed various strategies to cope with the problem.

Teachers can constantly reach out to immediate co-workers and superiors for assistance and feedback. Teachers are given social and administrative services to help them manage stressful situations [8]. Individuals must build a new educational philosophy by recognizing and appreciating the necessity to integrate and apply exceptional educational experiences that are both acceptable and positively influence subsequent experiences [32].

The workplace where teachers work is viewed as a distinct community of practice that acts as a context in which newcomers conform to society's norms, conduct, values, relationships, and beliefs. A welcoming learning environment may be built by engaging with families about the expectations for behavior and learning on a frequent and open basis. It promotes responsibility, includes families in the procedure, and contributes to students' learning environment growth [14].

"I adjust. I observe my colleagues' responses whenever there are issues, parents' concerns, and students' concerns on modules, papers, and even threats. I motivate students daily. I teach them well in reading and writing. Teaching real objects as teaching materials to understand the lessons well (P1, P5)."

"The school asked for donations and sponsorship. We have supplies from private schools in Digos City, like medicines, a teacher's table, books, and blackboards. We contextualize teaching and learning. We get teaching resources available in the community. We promote and practice flexibility. Even though we want to provide learning materials, we have difficulty bringing them to school because it is difficult and life-threatening (P3, P5, P6)."

Conclusion

The English teachers articulated cultural differences, language limitations, and communication difficulties as factors in developing a healthy connection with the community and maximizing teaching effectiveness. They experienced life-threatening incidents throughout their service, suffered from limited learning resources, and endured demotivating hardships getting to the station.

The participants enjoyed and suffered years of employment. They felt the community's welcome, and they were treated with respect. They were satisfied when they could motivate students to learn and accomplish assignments. English teachers adapted to the community but felt anxiety, stress, and uncertainty since they were sometimes threatened. Most participants were willing to be

reassigned to urban schools to be closer to their families. Some were eager to stay and encouraged other students to complete their studies and achieve their goals. Teachers from various locations adjusted to and embraced the school and its surroundings as coping mechanisms. They deployed and exploited contextual and collaborative activities to guarantee that students received a great education despite a lack of learning facilities and resources.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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