

Original Article

Why We Stay: Lived Experiences of Public Elementary School Teachers Working in Hinterland Schools

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Abstract

Teacher retention in remote schools shapes educational equity, yet persistence drivers remain underexplored in the Philippines. This phenomenological study explored why ten public elementary teachers remain in hinterland schools of Davao City despite profound material, cultural, and geographic constraints. Reflexive thematic analysis of in-depth interviews revealed that teachers face severe logistical and infrastructural challenges, which they navigate through adaptability, robust community support, and personal resilience. Their enduring commitment is deeply rooted in a strong sense of vocational purpose, community service, and opportunities for ongoing growth. Ultimately, the findings suggest that fostering teacher retention requires policy actions combining material provisions with relationship-based community engagement and continuous professional learning to sustain teacher autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

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1. Introduction

Teacher retention has direct consequences for learning opportunity because stable staffing supports coherent instruction, sustained school culture, and long term improvement. When teachers transfer or leave, schools face repeated recruitment, new teacher induction, and loss of institutional memory. These disruptions can weaken curriculum pacing, assessment practices, and relationships with learners and families. Organizational research has long shown that turnover is not only an individual choice but also a response to school conditions. In one influential analysis, teacher turnover

related strongly to the organizational context of schools and to staffing challenges within particular environments (Ingersoll, 2001). Evidence from other studies reinforces this view, because working conditions such as leadership support, time for collaboration, and access to resources predict professional satisfaction and intent to remain, especially in high need schools (Johnson et al., 2012). Large scale review work also indicates that attrition and retention correlate with multiple interacting domains, and the most consistent drivers include working conditions, organizational support, and job satisfaction (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, remote and underserved communities often face structural constraints that shape access to schooling and the lived realities of teachers. Schools in geographically isolated and disadvantaged contexts may contend with limited transport options, weak infrastructure, sparse learning materials, and reduced access to professional development. These constraints raise equity concerns because they affect both student learning and teacher wellbeing. The Department of Education has acknowledged persistent gaps in access and quality, and it has set long term priorities to reduce these gaps through the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 (Department of Education, 2022). Within this policy direction, the role of teachers in remote settings becomes central because teachers carry the daily work of bridging distance, responding to local needs, and sustaining classroom routines when services remain limited. Recent Philippine qualitative work describes similar patterns of hardship, such as difficult travel to assigned schools, limited supplies, and demands that extend beyond instruction (Galut, 2025). Such evidence supports the need for localized retention knowledge that reflects specific district and community realities.

International evidence suggests that rural retention needs more than financial incentives. Studies of small and rural schools show that recognition, respect, and relational belonging can anchor retention, because teachers stay when they experience professional value and social acceptance. For example, rural retention research framed teacher job satisfaction and long term stay through recognition processes that include respect from leaders, peers, and community members (Cuervo, 2025). Teacher wellbeing research also indicates that rural contexts can differ in both demands and resources, which implies that rural, regional, and metropolitan contexts need differentiated supports rather than a single national package (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). When systems ignore these contextual differences, support measures can miss practical barriers such as transport risk, extended unpaid labor, and limited access to learning resources. Thus, place based studies remain essential to guide retention strategies that fit local constraints and strengths.

A motivational lens helps explain why teachers can persist despite hardship. Self-Determination Theory posits that sustained motivation and wellbeing rely on satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In remote contexts, autonomy can appear as local problem solving and instructional flexibility, competence can develop through repeated adaptation to constraints, and relatedness can strengthen through deep ties with learners, families, and community members. When schools and communities support these needs, teachers can sustain commitment

even when external conditions remain difficult. This lens also helps interpret why community support emerged as a protective factor in many rural contexts, because relatedness support can buffer stress and provide meaning. By linking lived experiences to this motivational framework, the study can move beyond a deficit narrative and highlight actionable drivers of persistence.

This study examined the experiences of public elementary teachers assigned to hinterland schools in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City. The study aimed to document the major challenges that shape daily work, the coping strategies teachers employ, the reasons they choose to stay, and the insights they form through sustained service. These aims respond to the need for retention evidence that reflects the realities of geographically isolated settings, where teacher commitment often determines whether schooling remains stable for children. The study contributes by providing a structured thematic account of teacher experience that can guide district planning, school leadership practice, and community partnership strategies. Ultimately, the work seeks to support equitable education by informing policies that protect teachers who serve in difficult contexts and by identifying supports that help them remain effective and committed.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to describe and interpret how teachers make sense of sustained work in hinterland schools. Phenomenology fits inquiries that seek detailed accounts of lived experience and meaning rather than estimates of prevalence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study took place in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City, and focused on public elementary teachers assigned to schools located in remote or hard to reach communities.

Purposive sampling identified 10 participants from a pool of 19 teachers in the district. Inclusion criteria required at least five years of service in hinterland schools, work experience in geographically isolated and disadvantaged contexts, and evidence of persistence despite constraints. Purposive selection supports depth and relevance when the goal is rich information from participants who hold direct experience related to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The sample aimed to capture variation in professional roles and backgrounds to surface a broad range of perspectives on why teachers remain in remote areas.

Data collection relied on in depth, semi structured interviews guided by an interview protocol aligned with the research aims. The protocol followed established qualitative interviewing principles that emphasize open prompts, flexible probing, and attention to meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015). Interview questions covered daily teaching and living conditions, resource access, interaction with learners and the community, coping actions, reasons for staying, and perceived impacts on personal and professional life. Participants responded in English and Cebuano. When Cebuano responses occurred, the study produced direct English translations for

analysis and reporting, and it checked meaning with participants during follow up clarification when needed.

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis. This approach supports systematic pattern identification and coherent theme construction while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2023). The process included transcript familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and narrative write up. To strengthen analytic transparency, the researcher documented coding decisions and theme boundaries using a worked example approach that clarifies how codes cohere into themes and how themes relate to the research aims (Byrne, 2022).

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study applied strategies aligned with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These strategies included member checks for key interpretations, an audit trail that documented coding and theme revisions, and reflexive notes that recorded assumptions and decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality through pseudonyms and removal of identifying details from transcripts. Data storage followed secure handling practices to protect privacy, and reporting aimed to present participant voices with care and accuracy.

3. Results

3.1 Challenges in Hinterland Schools

Theme 1: Inadequate Infrastructure and Resources

Teachers described routine shortages in classroom space, furniture, and instructional materials. These shortages pushed teachers toward constant improvisation and reduced the range of classroom activities they could offer. They mentioned:

"The lack of resources makes it difficult to engage students. We often need to be creative and make our own materials just to keep the lessons going." (P1)

"I often have to teach in classrooms with limited space, and sometimes, we don't even have enough desks or chairs for the students." (P5)

"It is very hard to teach because we do not have enough supplies. Sometimes we need to make improvised materials just to keep the class going." (P3)

Theme 2: Cultural and Community-Related Challenges

Teachers reported the need to align instruction with local norms, values, and expectations. Participants emphasized that limited cultural familiarity could weaken

classroom authority and create misunderstandings with learners and families. They stated:

"There are certain cultural norms that we need to consider when teaching, and sometimes, we have to adjust our approach to align with those values." (P2)

"The community plays a huge role in how the children behave in class. If I don't understand their culture, it becomes hard to establish authority." (P6)

"Sometimes I struggle to teach because the children's culture is different. They do not understand some methods that are common in the city." (P4)

Theme 3: Geographical and Logistical Difficulties

Participants described long travel time, rough roads, and weather related barriers that reduced punctuality and contact time with learners. These conditions also increased fatigue and reduced time for lesson preparation and assessment work. They verbalized:

"The distance I have to travel to get to school is exhausting. The roads are rough, and sometimes I have to wake up early just to avoid being late." (P7)

"It's difficult to get to school when it rains. Flooded roads prevent me from reaching the school on time, and I lose valuable teaching hours." (P8)

"Distance and difficult roads have a big impact. Sometimes I wait a long time to arrive because it rains and there is flooding." (P9)

3.2 Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Resourcefulness and Adaptability

Teachers responded to material constraints through creative use of local resources and self-produced learning materials. Participants framed adaptation as a routine practice that kept lessons on track despite shortages. They mentioned:

"We make use of whatever we can find in the local community, like natural materials, to teach. It's all about being creative with limited resources." (P2)

"Since we don't have access to enough textbooks, we create our own learning materials using recycled paper and materials from the community." (P4)

"Sometimes we make the learning materials ourselves because we have no supplies." (P7)

Theme 2: Strong Community Support

Teachers described support from parents, local leaders, and community members who assisted with programs, maintenance tasks, and resource gaps. Participants noted that cooperation improved morale and increased the feasibility of school activities. They verbalized:

"We engage with the community regularly, involving parents in the education process. This helps us get their support for our programs." (P1)

"The local leaders are very supportive. They help us during the school clean-up drives and provide assistance when resources are low." (P5)

"Parents really help. Without support from the community, it is very hard to teach." (P6)

Theme 3: Personal Resilience and Dedication

Teachers described persistence rooted in commitment to learners and in hope drawn from student progress. Participants framed hardship as difficult yet manageable when they focused on meaning in work and visible learner growth. They stated:

"I remind myself that I am here to help the students, and that thought keeps me going, despite the daily challenges." (P3)

"It's tough, but when I see the students learning and growing, it makes it all worth it." (P2)

"We struggle, but when we see the children happy, we continue to do our best." (P8)

3.3 Reasons in Staying in Hinterland Schools

Theme 1: Deep Sense of Community Service

Teachers linked their decision to stay with responsibility toward learners and families who had limited access to educational support. Participants viewed retention as a moral choice that protects children's learning and future opportunities. They mentioned:

"I feel that my work here really makes a difference in these children's lives. I don't want to leave because I know they need us, and we're helping them break the cycle of poverty through education." (P1)

"Despite all the challenges, I can't imagine leaving. These kids need guidance, and I want to be that role model for them." (P3)

"Helping the children here is a big responsibility, and I do not want to leave them." (P6)

Theme 2: Personal and Professional Growth Opportunities

Participants described remote teaching as a demanding context that built competence, flexibility, and confidence. Teachers framed growth as skill development and personal maturity that came from daily problem solving and multi role work. They verbalized:

"Working in this environment has made me a better teacher. It challenges me every day, and that's something I really value." (P5)

"I've learned so many skills that I wouldn't have gained if I worked in a city school. It pushed me to think outside the box." (P8)

"Here I learned many new ways of teaching that I did not gain in other places." (P2)

Theme 3: Purpose as Teachers

Teachers described hinterland teaching as a calling that aligned with identity and values. Participants framed their role as a pathway to equitable learning opportunity for children who live far from urban services. They stated:

"It's not just a job for me; it's my calling. I want to make sure the children here have the same opportunities to learn as those in the city." (P4)

"I know it's tough, but I believe this is where I am needed the most. Being an educator here is more than just a career; it's my life's purpose." (P7)

"My work here is my mission, not just a job. I want to help the children succeed in life." (P10)

3.4 Insights for Sustained Service in Hinterland Schools

Theme 1: Community Impact

Teachers viewed their work as part of long term community development, not only classroom instruction. Participants described education as a lever that can reduce poverty and improve community futures. They mentioned:

"I'm not just teaching students; I'm helping build a better future for the community." (P3)

"Education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty here." (P6)

"My effort in teaching is not only for the children, but also for the community." (P4)

Theme 2: Personal Growth

Teachers described how hardship fostered humility, patience, and self-awareness. Participants framed growth as a shift in perspective that strengthened professional confidence and personal character. They verbalized:

"The difficulties help me grow as a person and a teacher." (P2)

"I learn so much from my students and the community." (P7)

"The hardships helped me grow and become a better person." (P9)

Theme 3: Vocational Commitment

Teachers described a durable commitment that went beyond employment and linked to life purpose. Participants noted that this commitment reduced thoughts of leaving even when challenges persisted. They stated:

"Teaching here is not just a job; it's something I'm meant to do." (P5)

"I can't leave because I know this is where I'm needed most." (P8)

"This is not only work; it is a calling for the children." (P10)

4. Discussion

The findings show that teachers in hinterland schools face layered constraints that combine material deprivation, cultural complexity, and geographic isolation. These constraints match global evidence that links weak working conditions to dissatisfaction and turnover risk, especially in high need settings (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Toropova et al., 2021). At the same time, the results demonstrate that persistence is not only a response to hardship. Teachers described active coping, deep ties with communities, and purpose driven commitment. This combination

suggests that retention in remote schools depends on both structural supports and meaning based supports that sustain motivation. Such a pattern aligns with research syntheses that emphasize the need for multi component retention strategies rather than single lever solutions (Nguyen et al., 2020).

The theme on inadequate infrastructure and resources shows how material scarcity shapes instruction in concrete ways. Participants reported limited classroom space, lack of furniture, and gaps in learning materials. These constraints reduce pedagogical options and increase workload because teachers must improvise materials and adjust lesson plans. Prior reviews link poor working conditions and resource constraints to higher attrition intent and reduced job satisfaction (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020). In the Philippine context, similar accounts appear in recent qualitative work that highlights limited resources and expanded teacher roles in remote areas (Galut, 2025). Policy attention to infrastructure, learning materials, and basic classroom needs can therefore act as a foundational retention strategy, because it reduces daily friction and protects instructional quality. When systems fail to address these basic needs, motivation must carry a burden that should belong to the institution.

Cultural and community related challenges extend the retention problem beyond material inputs. Participants described the need to negotiate classroom norms that differ from urban settings and to interpret learner behavior within local culture. Rural retention research suggests that recognition and respectful relationships can sustain teacher job satisfaction and commitment, because teachers feel valued by leaders and communities (Cuervo, 2025). In this study, cultural understanding appeared as both a challenge and a pathway to effectiveness, since teachers who learned local norms reported smoother interaction with learners and families. This indicates that retention policy should include cultural orientation, mentoring by locally experienced teachers, and structured community engagement that builds mutual trust. These actions can reduce misunderstanding and help teachers build a stable sense of belonging.

The theme on geographical and logistical difficulty points to a persistent demand that affects time, energy, and safety. Long travel and severe weather reduced contact time with learners and increased fatigue, which then affected preparation and assessment work. Teacher wellbeing research across locations indicates that rural contexts can present distinct demand profiles, and that rural support packages must address travel burden and resource access in ways that urban approaches do not (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). District level responses can include transport support, safety protocols for weather disruptions, flexible scheduling for travel, and coordination with local government for road and access improvement. Such actions can protect teaching time and reduce stress, which supports both retention and instructional quality. Without these supports, teachers may normalize risk and exhaustion, which can erode long term wellbeing and increase departure intent.

The coping themes show adaptive capacity that draws from both personal and social resources. Teachers used local materials and self-produced aids, and they also relied on parents and community leaders. These coping actions align with Self

Determination Theory, which links sustained motivation to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Resourcefulness reflects autonomy because teachers made local decisions that solved immediate problems, and it reflects competence because repeated adaptation strengthened skill. Community support reflects relatedness, which can buffer stress and sustain meaning. From a practical perspective, leaders can strengthen these protective factors through structured collaboration with parents, recognition of teacher initiative, and provision of time and support for teacher led innovation. Such actions respect teacher agency while also reducing the isolation that remote placement can create.

Reasons for staying in this study center on service, growth, and purpose. This constellation aligns with intrinsic and identified forms of motivation, where teachers internalize the value of their role and sustain action through meaning rather than reliance on external incentives alone (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers framed retention as a moral response to learner need, and they linked persistence to professional growth that the remote context demanded. This aligns with evidence that job satisfaction and commitment depend on both working conditions and a sense of professional value (Toropova et al., 2021). Retention strategies can therefore pair improvements in material conditions with support that sustains purpose, such as mentoring, career pathways, recognition programs, and professional learning that addresses remote teaching realities. When teachers can see a future in their role and feel valued, retention becomes more likely even when hardships remain.

Insights on community impact and vocational commitment suggest that teachers view their work as community building, which reinforces commitment over time. This framing aligns with national priorities that seek to close access and quality gaps through long term system development (Department of Education, 2022). When teachers can see how instruction links to community futures, work gains meaning that stabilizes commitment. Leaders can build on this insight by making impact visible, for example through community feedback loops, learner progress celebrations, and shared planning with local stakeholders. At the same time, meaning should not substitute for structural support. The system must avoid reliance on moral commitment as a replacement for resources and safety. Thus, retention action should integrate working condition improvement, transport and safety support, cultural competence, and relationship based community engagement. This integrated approach matches the lived realities reported by teachers and aligns with evidence that both context and motivation shape career decisions (Johnson et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

Teachers in hinterland schools of Tibungco District persist within an environment marked by limited infrastructure, cultural negotiation, and difficult travel. They cope through creative use of local resources, strong community partnership, and personal resilience that draws strength from learner progress. They stay because they value service, experience growth, and hold a strong sense of purpose

as educators. Retention in remote settings will improve when policy and school actions combine material investment with supports that strengthen relationships and professional agency. Priority actions include infrastructure and learning material provision, transport and safety measures, and culturally responsive orientation with mentoring. These actions can support teacher autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are central drivers of long term commitment.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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