

Original Article

## **Exploring the Lived Experiences of Public Elementary School Teachers in Implementing Academic Support Strategies for Student-Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers supporting student-athletes in the Mati South District of the Philippines. Through in-depth interviews with experienced educators selected via purposive sampling, the research documented the challenges faced, strategies employed, and insights gained when balancing students' academic and athletic demands. Thematic analysis revealed key findings across multiple areas. Teachers reported significant strain from balancing competing demands, navigating limited institutional support, and managing emotional and professional pressures. To cope, educators utilized adaptive instruction, deliberate time management, and extensive collaboration with parents, colleagues, and school personnel. Ultimately, these experiences fostered a more nuanced understanding of student-athletes' performance, spurred recommendations for robust support systems, and catalyzed the teachers' personal and professional growth. The findings emphasize that effective academic support requires both dedicated teachers and flexible, coordinated school structures.

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## **1. Introduction**

Public elementary school teachers who work with student-athletes carry a dual instructional responsibility. They must uphold classroom expectations for all learners while also responding to absences, fatigue, schedule disruptions, and performance pressures experienced by students who participate in organized sport. In this setting, academic support is not a peripheral task but a daily pedagogic decision that requires flexibility, judgment, and close attention to each learner's circumstances. Research on dual-career development has shown that the effort to combine education and sport can create persistent strain for student-athletes, especially when support systems are weak or uneven across institutions and stakeholders (O'Neil et al., 2021; Niehues et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2024).

The international literature increasingly treats student-athlete development as a whole-school and whole-system concern rather than a matter of individual grit alone. Studies on dual-career support have emphasized that student-athletes benefit when academic schedules, institutional procedures, and support relationships are designed to accommodate the demands of sport without diluting educational expectations (Hong et al., 2022; Gjaka et al., 2024). At the same time, the same literature warns that many support systems remain fragmented, with schools often offering flexibility in principle but leaving teachers to manage the practical consequences in classrooms and assessment routines (Niehues et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2024).

This tension is especially relevant in basic education, where students still develop foundational study habits, self-regulation, and academic confidence. When young learners take on serious athletic commitments, teachers often become the first line of support that keeps school participation, assignment completion, and learning continuity intact. Yet research has focused more heavily on collegiate or secondary contexts than on elementary classrooms. Existing work has documented the salience of academic advisors, tutoring, mentoring, and institutional accommodation in older populations (Kirby & Amason, 2021; Gjaka et al., 2024), but far less is known about how elementary teachers themselves experience the work of academic support in resource-constrained public school settings.

The problem is not only logistical. Support for student-athletes is also relational and emotional. Teachers must decide when to extend deadlines, when to modify tasks, how to preserve fairness for non-athlete classmates, and how to respond when students show discipline in sport but uneven follow-through in schoolwork. Research on teacher resilience and school support underscores that educators sustain complex work more effectively when leadership, collegial ties, opportunities for development, and professional autonomy are present (Bagdziūnienė et al., 2022; Diab & Green, 2024). In their absence, teachers may rely on personal commitment alone, which can intensify stress and create uneven support practices across classrooms.

Flexibility has emerged as a central concept in current educational research, but flexibility is most effective when it is structured rather than improvised. Studies of extension policies and flexible learning environments suggest that students benefit

when accommodations are explicit, equitable, and linked to learning continuity rather than ad hoc exceptions (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024; El Galad et al., 2024). For teachers who support student-athletes, this means that academic assistance must do more than excuse missed work. It must preserve participation in the curriculum, keep expectations visible, and maintain communication among school actors who shape the learner's daily schedule.

Within the Philippine public school context, these issues become sharper because institutional supports vary widely across schools, and teachers often work within limited time, limited materials, and competing administrative demands. A close examination of teachers' lived experiences can therefore illuminate how academic support is actually enacted in practice, what forms of strain recur, and what kinds of institutional responses are most urgently needed. Such inquiry is important not only for understanding teacher work but also for strengthening inclusive educational arrangements that allow student-athletes to remain academically engaged.

This study addressed that gap by examining the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Mati South District as they implemented academic support strategies for student-athletes. It asked three linked questions: what challenges teachers faced, how they coped with those challenges, and what insights they gained through the experience. By centering teachers' narratives, the study aimed to generate evidence that can inform school leadership, teacher preparation, and policy decisions on support systems for young student-athletes in public basic education.

## **2. Methodology**

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to examine how public elementary school teachers experienced the work of implementing academic support strategies for student-athletes. A phenomenological approach suited the inquiry because the study sought to understand the meaning teachers attached to recurring demands, decisions, and adaptations in their daily professional lives rather than to measure predetermined variables. The study was situated in Mati South District, Division of City of Mati, and drew on a constructivist view that knowledge about academic support emerges through lived experience, reflection, and social interaction within specific school contexts.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct experience with the phenomenon under study. The study identified 12 public elementary school teachers who had at least three years of experience and who had actively supported student-athletes in their academic work. Teachers without direct involvement in such support, those in primarily administrative roles, and those with insufficient experience were excluded. This sampling logic aimed to secure information-rich accounts from participants who could describe the academic, relational, and organizational dimensions of supporting student-athletes in public elementary classrooms.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted following institutional permission and ethical clearance procedures. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, held in settings intended to protect privacy, and later transcribed for analysis. The study also described reflexive attention to the researchers' assumptions, bracketing of prior views, and documentation of decisions during the inquiry process so that participants' accounts, rather than researcher preference, remained central to interpretation. Where participants spoke in a local language, quotations were retained in substance and are presented here in direct English translation for journal readability.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis, moving from familiarization with transcripts to initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition, and narrative reporting. This analytic process was used to organize findings around the three research aims of the study. The study further implemented strategies to enhance trustworthiness, including member checking of transcripts, maintenance of an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and triangulation with relevant literature and contextual information. Together, these procedures supported credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability while preserving the phenomenological emphasis on participants' lived meanings.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Challenges*

##### **Theme 1: Balancing Academic and Athletic Demands**

Teachers consistently described the difficulty of sustaining academic continuity when students had practices, games, and competition schedules that disrupted ordinary classroom routines. They mentioned:

*"It's challenging to ensure students complete assignments while they have games or practice sessions."(P1)*

*"Sometimes I have to adjust deadlines because of their sports commitments."(P3)*

*"Sometimes it is very difficult to balance academic requirements and the students' training schedule."(P5)*

*"I have to adjust class activities and homework because they have competitions."(P7)*

## **Theme 2: Limited Institutional Support**

Teachers reported that academic support was harder to sustain when school systems lacked clear monitoring procedures, shared coordination, and material support for student-athletes. They stated:

*“Sometimes, there’s no system in place to track student-athletes’ academic progress alongside sports schedules.”(P2)*

*“I often have to manage everything on my own because administrative support is limited.”(P4)*

*“It is difficult because support from the school administration and other staff is lacking when student-athletes need help.”(P6)*

*“Sometimes there is no clear coordination between coaches and teachers to balance academics and sports.”(P9)*

## **Theme 3: Emotional and Professional Strain**

Teachers also described emotional fatigue and work pressure that arose from the expectation that student-athletes should succeed in both domains without compromising either one. They verbalized:

*“It can be overwhelming to manage both academic progress and sports commitments for multiple students.”(P1)*

*“I feel stressed when trying to provide equal attention to all student-athletes.”(P3)*

*“Sometimes I feel the pressure of helping student-athletes while managing their academics.”(P5)*

*“Even when it is tiring and stressful, I still continue so I can support all students.”(P10)*

### *3.2 Coping Strategies*

## **Theme 1: Adapting Instructional Strategies**

Teachers responded to competing academic and athletic demands by modifying instruction so that missed lessons did not automatically become academic loss. They described adjustments such as altered lesson pacing, supplementary materials, and alternative activities that allowed student-athletes to reconnect with the curriculum after absences. They mentioned:

*“I adjust my lesson plans so that student-athletes can still keep up with the class even if they miss a session.”(P2)*

*"I provide extra materials or online resources so students can study at their own pace."(P4)*

*"Sometimes I create alternative activities so student-athletes can still follow the lessons."(P6)*

*"I need to modify my teaching methods so athletes can keep up with academics."(P8)*

## **Theme 2: Time Management and Prioritization**

Teachers further explained that support depended on careful planning of their own work and deliberate prioritization of student needs. They verbalized:

*"I plan my week carefully to ensure I can give extra attention to student-athletes when needed."(P1)*

*"Prioritizing urgent assignments helps me manage both regular students and student-athletes efficiently."(P3)*

*"Sometimes I set a schedule so I can give student-athletes time for extra tutoring."(P5)*

*"I need to prioritize tasks so I can accommodate the academic needs of the athletes."(P7)*

## **Theme 3: Seeking Support and Collaboration**

Teachers also relied on collaborative relationships to make academic support more workable and more consistent across settings. They pointed to exchanges with colleagues, parents, and school personnel as practical ways to monitor schedules, share information, and sustain coordinated support for student-athletes. They stated:

*"I collaborate with other teachers to create a consistent support system for student-athletes."(P12)*

*"Getting input from parents helps me understand the students' schedules better."(P5)*

*"I coordinate with other teachers and parents so we can monitor the progress of student-athletes."(P6)*

*"With the help of colleagues, I better understand how to support student-athletes."(P10)*

### **3.3 Insights**

#### **Theme 1: Perceptions of Academic Performance**

Teachers viewed student-athletes as capable of good academic performance, but only when discipline and time use remained strong amid sports participation. They mentioned:

*“Student-athletes are usually disciplined, but sometimes competitions interfere with completing assignments on time.”(P1)*

*“Some athletes excel academically because they manage their time well, while others struggle when practices clash with schoolwork.”(P3)*

*“Sometimes athletes perform better because they are organized, but when there are many competitions, they struggle.”(P5)*

*“If time is not managed well, their school tasks are easily delayed.”(P7)*

## **Theme 2: Improving Academic Support Systems**

Teachers identified concrete ways schools could strengthen support for student-athletes beyond individual teacher effort. They verbalized:

*“Providing extra learning materials or tutoring sessions would help athletes catch up after competitions.”(P2)*

*“Training teachers on strategies to support student-athletes would make academic assistance more effective.”(P4)*

*“The school should provide professional development and learning resources for teachers who support athletes.”(P6)*

*“It would be better to have a mentorship system where teachers and coaches coordinate for stronger support.”(P8)*

## **Theme 3: Personal and Professional Growth**

Teachers also described the experience as a source of learning that reshaped how they approached instruction, flexibility, and student care. They stated:

*“Working with student-athletes has taught me to be more flexible with deadlines and lesson plans.”(P1)*

*“I’ve learned to balance strict academic expectations with empathy for students’ athletic commitments.”(P3)*

*“My experience with student-athletes has improved my teaching approach, especially in managing the diverse needs of the class.”(P5)*

*“I learned that a holistic approach to education is truly important, not only academics but also extracurricular growth.”(P10)*

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings present academic support for elementary student-athletes as a form of negotiated balance rather than a stable routine. Teachers were not merely transmitting lessons to a subgroup of learners. They were constantly recalibrating expectations, timing, and classroom participation in response to training schedules, competitions, fatigue, and missed instructional time. This pattern mirrors dual-career scholarship showing that educational and sporting commitments often sit in tension and must be actively harmonized through contextual support rather than left to the learner alone (O'Neil et al., 2021; Niehues et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2024). In the present study, that harmonizing work occurred largely inside the classroom and was carried by teachers through informal adjustments and relationship-based decisions.

The first research aim showed that the burden of support was intensified by limited institutional backing. Teachers described the absence of coherent systems for tracking academic progress, sharing information, and coordinating around student-athletes' schedules. This echoes international evidence that dual-career systems become more effective when support is organized across educational and sport actors rather than dispersed among individual educators (Hong et al., 2022; Gjaka et al., 2024). In the absence of such structures, support becomes individualized and uneven, leaving teachers to construct solutions case by case. The finding also aligns with school leadership research that locates teacher resilience not only in personal endurance but in job resources, collegial support, and opportunities for professional action created by the institution itself (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022).

Teachers' descriptions of emotional and professional strain further suggest that academic support for student-athletes is affective labor as well as pedagogic labor. They were concerned not only with missed assignments but also with fairness, pressure, and the emotional consequences of sustained accommodation work. Such accounts resonate with literature showing that support roles become more sustainable when teachers are embedded in cultures of mentoring, collegial exchange, and structured professional support (Diab & Green, 2024). Where those supports are thin, flexibility may remain possible, but it is likely to depend on personal sacrifice and may therefore be difficult to sustain over time.

The second research aim clarifies how teachers kept support practices workable. Adaptive instruction emerged as a central response, with teachers modifying lesson plans, pacing, and task formats so that student-athletes could reconnect with ongoing lessons after sports-related absences. This is consistent with recent work on educational flexibility, which argues that accommodations are most educationally meaningful when they preserve access to learning rather than simply excuse non-completion (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024; El Galad et al., 2024). In the present study, teachers did not describe flexibility as lowered standards. Instead, they used it as a way to preserve continuity, maintain accountability, and reduce the academic cost of participation in school sport.

Time management and prioritization also appeared as forms of professional expertise. Teachers planned extra support, sequenced urgent tasks, and carved out time for targeted follow-up. These strategies reflect the broader dual-career literature, which treats the management of time, energy, and competing commitments as a decisive factor in student-athlete adjustment and success (O'Neil et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2024). Yet the present findings add an important nuance: time management was not only a student skill. It was also a teacher practice that made accommodation educationally coherent. The burden of coordinating time was thus distributed across both learner and teacher, although teachers appeared to absorb much of the organizational responsibility.

Collaboration with parents, colleagues, and school personnel emerged as a crucial protective mechanism, suggesting that support for student-athletes functions best as a shared ecology rather than an individual teacher effort. International work on junior and university dual-career systems similarly emphasizes the value of coordinated support entourage, including teachers, coaches, families, and institutional actors who can align expectations and reduce fragmentation (Hong et al., 2022; Gjaka et al., 2024). The teachers in this study framed collaboration in practical terms: information exchange, schedule awareness, progress monitoring, and consistent guidance. These practices signal that even in the absence of formal systems, teachers attempt to build informal micro-systems of support around each learner.

The third research aim revealed that teachers' insights went beyond coping and pointed toward a more differentiated understanding of student-athletes themselves. Participants did not treat student-athletes as a homogeneous group. Rather, they recognized that discipline and organization could support academic success, while schedule congestion and poor time management could quickly undermine it. This nuanced view aligns with research showing that student-athletes' educational outcomes vary considerably depending on support structures, motivational patterns, and the compatibility or conflict between sport and school commitments (Kirby & Amason, 2021; Lindo & Cutad, 2024; Niehues et al., 2022; O'Neil et al., 2021). The present findings therefore challenge simplified assumptions that athletic participation is either inherently beneficial or inherently disruptive to schooling.

Teachers' recommendations for stronger academic support systems were also consistent with the wider evidence base. They called for tutoring, learning resources, professional development, and coordinated guidance. These are not marginal add-ons; they are elements repeatedly identified in the literature as central to effective dual-career support, particularly when schools aim to protect both academic continuity and learner well-being (Hong et al., 2022; Gjaka et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2024). Within elementary education, such supports may be even more consequential because younger student-athletes are still developing self-regulation and cannot be expected to shoulder complex coordination demands without adult scaffolding.

Finally, the study suggests that sustained work with student-athletes can reshape teachers' own professional identities. Participants described greater flexibility, stronger empathy, and broader awareness of learner diversity. That pattern

converges with scholarship that links supportive contexts and reflective practice to professional growth and resilience among teachers (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022; Diab & Green, 2024). In this sense, supporting student-athletes was not only a source of strain but also a site of pedagogic development. The experience pushed teachers toward more holistic conceptions of student success in which academic performance, extracurricular commitment, and learner well-being were treated as interconnected rather than competing educational concerns.

## **5. Conclusion**

This phenomenological study shows that public elementary school teachers who support student-athletes work within a demanding intersection of instructional responsibility, schedule disruption, and relational care. They face recurring challenges in balancing academic and athletic demands, navigating limited institutional support, and carrying emotional and professional strain. In response, they adapt instruction, manage time deliberately, and build collaboration with colleagues, parents, and other school actors. Their reflections also reveal that student-athletes' academic outcomes are not fixed but shaped by discipline, time use, and the quality of support systems surrounding them. Overall, the findings indicate that effective academic support for student-athletes at the elementary level depends on more than teacher goodwill. It requires structured school support, professional development, and coordinated mechanisms that allow flexibility, continuity, and accountability to coexist.

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## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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