

Original Article

Uncovering the Career Development Experiences in Remote Areas: Elementary School Teachers in Focus

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examined how elementary school teachers in remote areas of Mati North District, Division of the City of Mati, experienced career development under conditions of geographic isolation, constrained access, and uneven institutional support. Ten public elementary school teachers with at least three years of service in remote schools participated in in-depth interviews. The study used purposive sampling and thematic analysis to identify patterned meanings across participants' accounts. Three clusters of findings emerged. First, teachers described career development as constrained by limited access to professional development opportunities, geographical isolation and logistical difficulties, and inadequate institutional support. Second, they responded through three practical strategies: attendance in local training opportunities when available, reliance on collaboration and support networks, and self-initiated professional growth through personal study and experimentation with teaching practices. Third, their reflections pointed to resilience and perseverance, the value of community support, and a sustained commitment to lifelong learning as central to professional survival and growth in remote contexts. The findings show that career development in remote schools is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the structure of access, mentorship, recognition, and professional community available to teachers.

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1. Introduction

Teacher career development depends on access to professional learning, mentoring, collegial exchange, and institutional recognition. In remote school contexts, however, these conditions are often uneven, delayed, or structurally absent. Distance from district centers, weak transport links, limited connectivity, and small professional networks can turn routine growth activities into costly and irregular events. The result is not merely inconvenience. It is a pattern of professional marginalization in which teachers must sustain instructional quality while navigating fewer opportunities for advancement, weaker visibility within the system, and thinner forms of organizational support.

This problem matters because professional growth is tied to teacher effectiveness, commitment, and retention. OECD data have long framed teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners whose work quality depends on access to ongoing development, collaboration, and professional autonomy (OECD, 2019). More recent scholarship has sharpened this point by showing that school location shapes how work demands and resources affect teacher wellbeing. Kingsford-Smith et al. (2023) found that teachers' work conditions are linked to wellbeing across locations, while location-specific resource patterns influence how demands are experienced. In rural and remote settings, the professional environment is often defined by scarcity, not only in material resources but also in access to feedback, expert support, and career pathways.

A growing body of research also shows that the professional isolation of rural and remote teachers is not a secondary issue. It is central to how they experience teaching and to whether they can sustain a long-term career. In the Philippine context, Galut (2025) documented how teachers assigned to remote areas contend with difficult access, limited resources, and thin support systems, yet remain in the profession through resilience and adaptive practice. Fabrigas and Paglinawan (2025) similarly showed that remote teachers in Bukidnon face professional isolation and resource constraints that require strong coping strategies and systemic support. These findings suggest that remoteness affects both the day-to-day conditions of teaching and the longer trajectory of professional development.

The challenge is also organizational. Career development does not advance through teacher effort alone. It depends on systems that create access to training, reward participation, support reflection, and connect teachers to professional communities. Mgaiwa and Milinga (2024) argued that teacher preparation and continuous professional development must be treated as linked parts of a single developmental continuum rather than as disconnected stages. Their review is especially useful for remote settings because it highlights how fragmented support structures weaken professional growth. When teachers in geographically isolated schools receive delayed notices, limited funding, or no mentoring infrastructure, even motivated educators may experience stalled progression.

Mentorship and collegial support are particularly important in such contexts. Wang et al. (2024) emphasized in their systematic review that effective mentoring in in-service teacher education depends on relational competence, reflective dialogue, and context-sensitive support. This is highly relevant for remote teachers, who may not have ready access to senior colleagues or structured career guidance. Likewise, Christensen and Jerrim (2025) showed that participation in professional learning communities is positively associated with job satisfaction across many contexts, even if effects on other outcomes vary by setting. The implication is clear: teachers benefit when they are not left to grow in professional isolation.

Digital and blended forms of professional learning may help reduce some of these disadvantages, but only when designed around teacher context rather than technical delivery alone. Morrison and Hughes (2024) found that online professional learning becomes more meaningful when it combines synchronous and asynchronous opportunities, sustained engagement, and collaborative interaction. For remote teachers, this kind of design matters because one-off webinars or generic training modules rarely compensate for the deeper lack of professional community. Technology can widen access, but it cannot replace thoughtful structures of support, follow-up, and recognition.

The literature also points to the role of resilience, identity, and social support in professional persistence. Sun et al. (2024) described teacher resilience in rural schools as a long-term, culturally shaped developmental process rather than a fixed personal trait. Salvo-Garrido et al. (2025) linked resilience to wellbeing and performance, while Martí-González et al. (2023) showed that social support strongly predicts teacher job satisfaction. These studies matter because they shift the conversation away from the simplistic view that remote teachers succeed through grit alone. Resilience is real, but it develops within social and institutional conditions that can either strengthen or erode it.

Professional identity also shapes commitment to remain and grow in rural teaching. Wang et al. (2025) argued that commitment to rural teaching is tied to professional identity, suggesting that career intentions are influenced by whether teachers see their work as recognized, meaningful, and socially valued. In remote areas, where advancement may be slow and visibility limited, teachers can struggle to reconcile strong professional purpose with weak structural reinforcement. This tension makes it necessary to examine not only what challenges teachers face, but also how they interpret those challenges and what forms of agency they use to keep moving forward.

Despite the relevance of this issue, studies that center the career development experiences of elementary school teachers in remote areas of Mati North District remain scarce. Much of the available literature speaks broadly about rural education, teacher resilience, or professional development systems, but fewer studies describe how remote teachers themselves make sense of stalled access, delayed opportunities, local coping, and the value of community support in one specific Philippine locality. This study addresses that gap by examining three questions: what challenges teachers

face in career development in remote areas, how they cope with those challenges, and what insights they derive from those experiences.

By focusing on teachers' lived accounts, the study contributes a grounded understanding of career development in a geographically marginalized context. It also speaks to a practical concern for school leaders, division offices, and policymakers: professional growth cannot be treated as a neutral or evenly distributed process when teachers work under radically different conditions of access. Remote teachers do not simply need motivation. They need responsive systems that recognize distance as a structural issue and redesign support accordingly.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine how elementary school teachers in remote areas experienced career development. The design was appropriate because the inquiry sought to understand how participants interpreted the barriers, adjustments, and meanings attached to professional growth in geographically isolated schools.

The study was conducted in the Mati North District, Division of the City of Mati, and focused on public elementary school teachers assigned to remote areas. Purposive sampling was used to identify teachers who could speak directly to the phenomenon under investigation. Participants met three conditions: they were active public elementary school teachers, they were assigned to remote schools in the district, and they had at least three years of teaching experience in that context. Ten teachers participated in the study.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews that encouraged participants to describe the obstacles they encountered, the strategies they used, and the reflections they formed about career development in remote settings. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. The study observed core ethical safeguards through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the use of participant codes rather than names.

The analysis followed a thematic procedure consistent with phenomenological inquiry and the logic of Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly to establish familiarity, significant statements were coded, related codes were clustered, and broader themes were refined against the full dataset until patterned meanings became clear. Throughout the analysis, attention remained on preserving the teachers' own accounts while reducing researcher intrusion through reflexive reading, iterative comparison, and consistency checks across transcripts.

3. Results

3.1 Challenges

Theme 1: Limited Access to Professional Development Opportunities

Participants consistently described professional development as physically and administratively distant from their schools. They reported that workshops, seminars, and training sessions were often held in city locations, which reduced participation and limited opportunities that could strengthen promotion credentials and professional competence. They mentioned:

“Most training sessions are conducted in the city, so attending them is almost impossible for us.” (P1)

“Sometimes I miss out on career advancement because I cannot join workshops that could improve my skills.” (P7)

“It is very difficult to attend trainings because the place is very far from the city.” (P8)

“Sometimes the memo does not reach us because our place is so far away.” (P10)

Theme 2: Geographical Isolation and Logistical Difficulties

Participants reported that remoteness created practical barriers that extended beyond training attendance and affected further study, networking, and promotion-related participation. Long travel time, poor road conditions, and high transport costs were described as recurring obstacles that delayed or discouraged professional engagement. They stated:

“Traveling to attend seminars often takes hours, and sometimes the roads are impassable.” (P2)

“Being far from educational centers limits our ability to network and gain new knowledge.” (P4)

“The travel is very difficult, especially when the training is held in a far place.” (P5)

“Sometimes the cost of going to training is too high, and even promotion gets delayed.” (P8)

Theme 3: Inadequate Institutional Support

Participants described a weak support environment for career development within their schools and the wider system. They noted the absence or insufficiency of mentorship, career guidance, follow-up opportunities, and administrative mechanisms

that could help teachers in remote assignments plan and sustain professional growth. They verbalized:

“Sometimes we feel left behind because there is no proper guidance for career growth in our school.” (P3)

“Support from administration is minimal; we have to find our own ways to improve professionally.” (P4)

“There is no clear support from the school administration for our career development.” (P9)

“Without mentorship, it is very difficult to make progress in one’s career.” (P10)

3.2 Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Attending Local Training Programs

Participants described making deliberate efforts to join seminars, workshops, and other learning events that were locally available or geographically closer to their schools. Even when access remained difficult, these nearby opportunities were treated as practical entry points for continued growth. They mentioned:

“Even if the workshops are far, I try to attend local seminars whenever there’s an opportunity.” (P2)

“Sometimes I travel to nearby schools or training centers to join seminars that can help my career.” (P5)

“I attend trainings that are available in our area even when the travel is difficult.” (P7)

“If there is a local workshop, I really make sure to join so I can improve my skills.” (P9)

Theme 2: Collaboration and Support Networks

Participants relied on colleagues, senior teachers, mentors, and local education contacts for advice and information about career opportunities. Professional relationships served as channels for updates, practical guidance, emotional support, and shared problem solving. They verbalized:

“I often consult with senior teachers to get advice on professional growth.” (P2)

“Working with colleagues helps me find opportunities that I would otherwise miss.” (P3)

“We group ourselves with other teachers so we can share tips and updates about trainings.” (P6)

“Mentorship from experienced teachers has greatly helped my career planning.” (P8)

Theme 3: Self-Initiated Professional Growth

Participants emphasized personal initiative as an important way to continue learning when formal support was limited. They described independent study, personal planning, reading, and experimentation with new teaching strategies as part of their effort to remain professionally active. They stated:

“Sometimes I study new teaching strategies on my own to prepare for career advancement.” (P3)

“Reading books and printed materials helps me develop skills that are not taught in workshops.” (P5)

“I make personal plans to improve my teaching and career prospects.” (P7)

“Even without a formal program, I strive to learn and practice new skills on my own.” (P10)

3.3 Insights

Theme 1: Resilience and Perseverance

Participants reflected on persistence as a necessary disposition for sustaining a career in remote schools. They described professional growth as slow and difficult, yet still possible through patience, determination, and a sustained positive outlook. They mentioned:

“Despite the difficulties, I remain determined to improve myself and grow professionally.” (P1)

“Challenges in remote areas make us more resilient and creative in finding solutions.” (P3)

“It really takes patience and strength to continue one’s career even when the place is difficult.” (P5)

“Even if progress is slow, I keep striving because I want to reach my goals.” (P7)

Theme 2: Value of Community Support

Participants viewed support from colleagues, mentors, and the local education community as a vital source of encouragement and guidance. These relationships helped them navigate uncertainty, sustain morale, and remain connected to professional purpose. They verbalized:

“Support from fellow teachers and mentors is crucial in navigating career challenges.” (P1)

“Sharing experiences with other teachers helps us learn and grow together.” (P4)

“The support of our community and co-workers has greatly helped our career growth.” (P6)

“Guidance from experienced teachers encourages me to keep improving myself.” (P8)

Theme 3: Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Participants framed career development as a continuous responsibility that does not depend only on formal programs. They stressed that initiative, discipline, and constant self-improvement remain necessary even when institutional opportunities are irregular or absent. They stated:

“I always look for ways to improve my skills and knowledge, even on my own.” (P3)

“Learning doesn’t stop; I try to practice new strategies and methods regularly.” (P5)

“Even without formal training, I continue to study and practice new skills.” (P7)

“My commitment to self-improvement helps me stay motivated and focused on my career goals.” (P10)

4. Discussion

The findings show that career development in remote schools is shaped by unequal access rather than by lack of teacher aspiration. Participants did not describe indifference toward professional growth. Instead, they depicted a field of delayed notices, distant venues, weak mentoring, and costly travel, all of which narrowed the routes through which they could pursue advancement. This pattern resonates with broader work on teacher professionalism that treats continuous development as a core part of the profession rather than an optional supplement. OECD (2019) argued that teacher professionalism rests in part on opportunities for lifelong learning, collaboration, and skill renewal. In the present study, these professional conditions were unevenly distributed because distance altered how teachers could enter and sustain such opportunities.

The first major finding, limited access to professional development opportunities, suggests that the problem is structural before it is individual. Participants consistently linked career stagnation to inaccessible training schedules,

late communication, and the concentration of professional development in city sites. This aligns with Mgaiwa and Milinga's (2024) argument that continuous professional development cannot function well when support structures are fragmented. It also extends the observation of Morrison and Hughes (2024) that meaningful professional learning requires sustained design, social interaction, and flexible participation structures. In remote contexts, the absence of these design features does not merely reduce convenience. It produces exclusion from the very activities through which competence, confidence, and promotion readiness are often judged.

Geographical isolation and logistical difficulty emerged as more than background conditions. They acted as active filters on participation. Participants described travel time, road conditions, and transport costs as barriers that shaped whether they could attend seminars, pursue further study, or build wider professional networks. Similar patterns appear in Philippine and international work on remote teaching. Galut (2025) showed that teachers in remote areas often navigate difficult physical access and resource scarcity as ordinary features of their professional lives, while Fabrigas and Paglinawan (2025) documented how such conditions intensify professional isolation. The present study reinforces this insight by showing that distance is not only a challenge for classroom delivery. It is a career-development constraint with cumulative effects on recognition, opportunity, and progression.

A third constraint involved inadequate institutional support. Participants' accounts of weak mentorship, limited guidance, and minimal administrative follow-through suggest that remote assignment may amplify the absence of career scaffolding. This point is especially important because support systems often determine whether teachers can translate motivation into progress. Wang et al. (2024) emphasized that effective mentoring requires relational, reflective, and context-sensitive competence. Without structured mentorship, remote teachers are left to decode career advancement largely on their own. The issue is therefore not only the shortage of opportunities but the shortage of interpretive and relational support that helps teachers locate themselves within those opportunities.

At the same time, the findings show that teachers do not respond passively to these constraints. Their coping strategies reveal practical agency. Attendance in local training programs reflects a place-based response to limited access. When formal development is concentrated elsewhere, teachers rely on what is proximate, even if such opportunities are fewer or smaller in scale. This behavior supports the broader argument that decentralized and context-responsive professional learning may be more realistic for remote contexts than models that assume regular travel to urban centers. It also suggests that school divisions and districts can reduce inequality by bringing professional learning closer to teachers rather than expecting teachers to repeatedly absorb the costs of distance.

Collaboration and support networks formed a second strategy and a crucial professional resource. Participants described colleagues, mentors, and local contacts as sources of information, encouragement, and practical advice. This finding is consistent with Christensen and Jerrim (2025), who found that professional learning

communities are positively related to job satisfaction across many national contexts. It also echoes Martí-González et al. (2023), whose work underscored the importance of social support for teacher job satisfaction. In the present study, collegial networks did more than improve morale. They functioned as informal career infrastructure, compensating for absent formal mechanisms. This is a significant point for practice because it shows that professional growth in remote schools often depends on relational pathways that policy tends to undervalue.

The theme of self-initiated professional growth further demonstrates that teachers in remote schools continue to invest in development even when systems are weak. Participants described self-study, reading, personal planning, and experimentation with instructional techniques as ways of protecting their professional momentum. This does not mean that individual effort can substitute for institutional responsibility. Rather, it shows how teachers preserve agency under constrained conditions. Sun et al. (2024) described resilience in rural teaching as a developmental process shaped by culture, context, and available resources. The current findings fit that view. Teachers' independent efforts were not signs that support was unnecessary. They were signs that teachers refused to let structural limits fully define their professional future.

The insights teachers drew from their experiences deepen this interpretation. Resilience and perseverance were central, but participants did not portray resilience as heroic self-sufficiency. Their narratives suggest a more grounded form of endurance that includes patience, adaptation, and disciplined hope. This reading aligns with Salvo-Garrido et al. (2025), who linked teacher resilience to wellbeing and performance, and with Galut (2025), who documented the endurance required of teachers assigned to difficult remote posts. Resilience here is best understood as a relational and contextual resource rather than a purely internal trait.

The value of community support was equally prominent. Participants repeatedly emphasized that support from peers and mentors helped them continue, learn, and stay focused. This mirrors the growing recognition that teacher development is social as much as technical. Lemon and Harris (2025) showed that wellbeing narratives in regional, rural, and remote settings are deeply shaped by contextually responsive support. The present study suggests that such support also matters for career development. Where formal structures are thin, community becomes part of the developmental environment. Recognition, advice, and shared experience reduce not only stress but also professional invisibility.

Commitment to lifelong learning completed the interpretive picture. Participants expressed a strong ethic of continuous improvement even when formal programs were limited. This matters because it complicates stereotypes that remote teachers are detached from innovation or development. Their accounts instead reveal a professional identity anchored in persistence, self-renewal, and responsibility to learners. This finding can be read alongside Wang et al. (2025), who linked professional identity to commitment to rural teaching. When teachers continue to learn despite institutional constraints, they affirm a strong sense of professional purpose

(Lindo & Cutad, 2024; Lindo & Panes, 2024). Yet this commitment should not be romanticized. Systems that depend too heavily on teacher sacrifice risk normalizing inequity.

Overall, the study indicates that career development in remote schools is a negotiated process between structural barriers and teacher agency. Teachers remain motivated, but motivation alone does not equal access. The challenge for educational leadership is therefore not to persuade remote teachers to value growth. They already do. The challenge is to build support systems that match that commitment through accessible professional development, stronger mentorship, reliable communication, and recognition of the additional burdens created by distance. Without such changes, career development remains unevenly distributed, and remote teachers continue to bear professional costs that are produced by geography but maintained by policy and organizational design.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the career development experiences of elementary school teachers in remote areas are marked by a persistent gap between professional commitment and structural opportunity. Teachers in Mati North District did not lack motivation to grow. What constrained them were inaccessible professional development venues, travel burdens, weak mentoring structures, delayed information flow, and limited administrative support. In response, they relied on local training opportunities, collegial networks, and self-directed learning to sustain professional movement. Their reflections further showed that resilience, community support, and commitment to lifelong learning are central to career survival in remote teaching contexts. The study concludes that career development for remote teachers cannot be treated as an individual responsibility alone. It requires a system that actively compensates for distance through decentralized training, responsive mentoring, stronger local support, and more equitable pathways for recognition and advancement.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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