Original Article

# Uncovering the Experiences in Makeshift Classrooms: Elementary School Teachers in Focus

Pearl Gen Silatan [1], Josephine Baguio [1,*]

Received: 05 January 2026; Revised: 10 February 2026;
Accepted: 15 February 2026; Published: 16 February 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.66074/C5V4B3N2M

**Abstract**

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how public elementary school teachers experience teaching in makeshift classrooms within the Mati South District. Utilizing in-depth interviews with educators experienced in temporary, resource-constrained spaces, the research employed thematic analysis to uncover the realities of their daily instructional environments. The findings highlight significant challenges, including limited instructional resources, overcrowded spaces, and considerable emotional and professional strain. To cope, teachers utilize resource improvisation, adaptive classroom management, and peer support. Ultimately, these educators view their experiences as catalysts for personal growth, resilience, and pedagogical creativity, while underscoring the critical need for institutional backing. The study concludes that makeshift classrooms profoundly reshape instructional decisions, emotional labor, and professional identity. Consequently, stronger material provisions, context-responsive professional development, and sustained school-level support are essential to maintain instructional quality and teacher well-being in fragile learning conditions.

*Keywords*: adaptability, makeshift classrooms, phenomenology, resilience, teachers

[1] Graduate School, Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao, Philippines
* Correspondence: josephinebbaguio@outlook.com

Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2026

## 1. Introduction

Across many educational systems, temporary and makeshift classrooms have become an enduring response to damaged infrastructure, enrollment pressure,

displacement, and fiscal constraint rather than a brief emergency arrangement. When instruction moves into improvised rooms, temporary shelters, partitioned halls, or physically constrained spaces, the classroom ceases to be a neutral backdrop and becomes an active condition that shapes pedagogy, movement, attention, interaction, and teacher judgment. Research on learning environments shows that physical space mediates what teachers can do, how students can participate, and how routines of instruction are sustained over time; thus, questions of classroom adequacy are inseparable from questions of educational quality (Campbell, 2020; Lucić, 2021). In settings where teachers must uphold curriculum expectations despite unstable material conditions, understanding lived experience is central to understanding practice.

The Philippine context makes this issue especially urgent. Public school teachers in geographically exposed and resource-constrained communities often work under conditions shaped by typhoons, building damage, temporary relocation, or inadequate facilities. In such contexts, the problem is not only the absence of ideal infrastructure but also the ongoing labor required to teach well in spaces that were not designed for sustained classroom use. Limited furniture, scarce instructional materials, heat, noise, congestion, and the lack of secure storage or technological access can narrow the range of possible strategies that teachers can implement. As Cong-Lem (2022) argues from a cultural-historical activity perspective, teaching is always mediated by tools, routines, and social conditions; when those mediational resources are weak or disrupted, the entire activity system of instruction is altered.

Recent scholarship suggests that adverse teaching environments affect both instructional work and teacher well-being. Flores (2020) showed that teachers in difficult reform-era conditions often survive through resilience, resistance, and adaptation, but that resilience should not be mistaken for the absence of structural problems. Chang (2020) likewise demonstrated that the emotional demands of teaching can intensify burnout when teachers must continually regulate frustration, disappointment, and strain. In crisis-sensitive educational contexts, Hopman and Clark (2023) further noted that teachers' emotional well-being is not peripheral to educational effectiveness but integral to it. These studies matter for makeshift classrooms because they suggest that the physical inadequacy of learning spaces can trigger a chain of instructional, emotional, and organizational consequences.

At the same time, the literature also indicates that teachers do not respond to constrained conditions passively. They improvise materials, alter movement patterns, reorganize class routines, draw on peer support, and redesign activities to preserve learner participation. Lucić (2021), in work on wartime makeshift educational spaces, showed that instructional continuity in fragile settings is often sustained through locally invented pedagogies rather than through the faithful transfer of conventional classroom routines. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2020) documented that coping strategies, professional relationships, and adaptive thinking become critical when teachers work under destabilized instructional conditions. These insights suggest that the study of makeshift classrooms must account not only for deficits but also for the situated forms of agency through which teachers keep schooling possible.

Despite these important insights, the lived experiences of elementary school teachers assigned to makeshift classrooms remain underdescribed, particularly in localized Philippine public-school settings. Much of the available literature addresses emergency education, flexible learning environments, teacher stress, or resilience in broad terms, yet fewer studies center the day-to-day phenomenological texture of teaching in temporary classroom spaces where scarcity, crowding, and professional commitment coexist. A phenomenological lens is appropriate because it privileges how participants perceive, interpret, and give meaning to an experience that is both practical and deeply personal (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Lindo & Cutad, 2024; Lindo & Panes, 2024). Rather than reducing the issue to infrastructure metrics alone, such an approach makes visible how teachers encounter the classroom as lived reality.

This paper therefore examines the experiences of elementary school teachers working in makeshift classrooms in Mati South District. It addresses three linked questions: What challenges do teachers encounter in makeshift classrooms? How do they cope with those challenges in practice? What insights do they derive from these experiences for their professional work and for the support they need? By answering these questions, the study contributes a practice-near account of teaching under constrained spatial conditions and offers evidence that can inform school support, professional development, and policy responses for temporary learning environments.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine how elementary school teachers experienced teaching in makeshift classrooms. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry sought to describe the meaning structure of a shared experience rather than measure variables or test predetermined relationships. In educational research, phenomenological inquiry is especially useful when the phenomenon is complex, context-bound, and insufficiently captured by surface description alone (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The design positioned the teachers' accounts as the primary source of knowledge and treated their reflections on classroom scarcity, adaptation, and professional strain as analytically significant evidence of how teaching is lived in temporary learning environments.

The study was conducted in Mati South District, Division of the City of Mati, and involved 10 public elementary school teachers selected from a pool of 21 eligible teachers working in makeshift classrooms. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants who had direct experience teaching in temporary or resource-poor instructional spaces and who could speak in detail about the demands of that work. Inclusion criteria required active service in a public elementary school, at least two years of teaching experience, and direct exposure to classroom conditions characterized by limited space, material scarcity, overcrowding, or other infrastructural constraints. Teachers whose experience in makeshift classrooms was too brief to support sustained reflection, or whose roles were primarily administrative,

were excluded. In qualitative inquiry, adequacy rests on depth, relevance, and analytic sufficiency rather than statistical representativeness; the sample size was therefore treated as appropriate once the dataset yielded recurring patterns and thematic completeness across participants' narratives (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This format allowed the researchers to maintain a coherent line of inquiry while still probing emergent experiences, clarifying meanings, and inviting examples from daily teaching practice. The interview guide was aligned with the three focal concerns of the study: the challenges teachers encountered, the strategies they used, and the insights they developed. Interviews were designed to elicit experience-centered descriptions rather than short opinion statements, and participants were encouraged to narrate concrete episodes involving classroom space, resource use, emotional demands, and support systems.

The researchers used bracketing throughout the inquiry to reduce the influence of prior assumptions about temporary classrooms and to keep analytic attention on what participants themselves described. Bracketing in phenomenological work does not imply the complete elimination of subjectivity; rather, it requires disciplined reflexive awareness so that prior beliefs do not overwhelm participants' meanings (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Reflexive notes were maintained during interviewing and early analysis to document emerging assumptions, interview dynamics, and developing interpretations. This procedure strengthened transparency and helped the analysis remain grounded in participant language and experiential detail.

Interview data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis moved from repeated reading of transcripts to the identification of significant statements, initial coding, clustering of related meanings, review of thematic coherence, and refinement of final themes. This analytic process was informed by contemporary guidance that treats thematic analysis not as a mechanical coding exercise but as a method requiring conceptual clarity, interpretive discipline, and alignment between data, questions, and claims (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023). The final reporting structure preserved the study's three research aims and organized each aim around the themes most consistently supported by the interview corpus. Member checking and audit-trail practices were retained as credibility procedures to improve the trustworthiness of the resulting account.

Ethical safeguards were integrated throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured before interview commencement, and participants were reminded of their right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality was protected through participant codes rather than personal identifiers, and attention was given to the possibility that discussing constrained work conditions could evoke frustration or stress. The study therefore treated participant dignity, privacy, and emotional welfare as central research obligations. These procedures aligned the inquiry with the practical ethics of qualitative interviewing in school-based contexts, where professional vulnerability can accompany even routine reflection on workplace conditions.

## 3. Results

### *3.1 Challenges*

**Theme 1: Managing Limited Resources**

Teachers consistently reported that instructional work was constrained by the scarcity of textbooks, visual aids, subject-specific materials, and other basic teaching resources. The absence of ready-to-use materials required them to prepare substitutes on their own and made lesson explanation more difficult, especially in content-heavy areas. They mentioned:

> *"It's hard to teach effectively when there aren't enough textbooks or learning materials for every student." (P2)*
> *"I have to create teaching aids from scratch because we lack proper resources." (P5)*
> *"Sometimes the teaching materials are very limited, so I need to make improvised tools for the class." (P6)*
> *"Resources are lacking, especially in science and mathematics, so I struggle to explain the concepts." (P8)*

**Theme 2: Classroom Organization and Space Constraints**

Teachers described the classroom itself as physically restrictive, with small spaces and overcrowding that complicated movement, monitoring, seating arrangement, and lesson flow. These conditions affected student participation and made it difficult to maintain focus and equitable engagement during instruction. They stated:

> *"Arranging desks and moving around is difficult because the classroom is so small." (P1)*
> *"Overcrowding makes it challenging to monitor every student and ensure participation." (P3)*
> *"It is very difficult to manage the class because the classroom is small and there are many students." (P7)*
> *"Sometimes students struggle to focus because the classroom is too small and too crowded." (P9)*

**Theme 3: Emotional and Professional Strain**

Teachers linked the material and spatial limitations of makeshift classrooms to fatigue, pressure, and moments of professional self-doubt. At the same time, their

accounts showed that emotional strain coexisted with a strong commitment to students and a determination to continue teaching well. They verbalized:

> *"Teaching in these conditions is exhausting, but I try to stay motivated for the sake of my students." (P2)*
> *"It can be stressful when resources are limited, yet I feel proud when students learn despite the challenges." (P4)*
> *"Sometimes I feel pressure and exhaustion, but I still need to continue for my students." (P5)*
> *"Despite all the difficulties, I still continue so I can help my students learn." (P10)*

*3.2 Coping Strategies*

**Theme 1: Resource Improvisation**

Teachers responded to material scarcity by creating, adapting, or recycling instructional aids from whatever was locally available. Improvisation was not occasional but routine, and it functioned as a practical means of sustaining explanation, engagement, and lesson continuity. They mentioned:

> *"I make learning aids from recycled materials to help explain difficult concepts." (P1)*
> *"I often design games and interactive activities to engage students using what is available." (P3)*
> *"Sometimes I make flashcards and visual aids from cardboard and scrap paper so that students can learn." (P5)*
> *"When materials are lacking, I really improvise so that students can understand the lesson." (P7)*

**Theme 2: Adaptive Classroom Management**

Teachers actively modified seating, grouping, pacing, and teaching style in order to make small or crowded classrooms more workable. Their accounts showed continual adjustment of routines so that participation could still occur even when the room layout did not support conventional instruction. They verbalized:

> *"I group students strategically so everyone can participate and learn effectively." (P2)*
> *"I adjust lesson pacing and use peer tutoring to ensure that no student is left behind." (P4)*
> *"I adjust the classroom arrangement and create groups so the class can run more efficiently even in a small space." (P6)*

> *"Sometimes I need to be flexible in my teaching style so I can accommodate all students in a small classroom." (P8)*

**Theme 3: Emotional and Peer Support Strategies**

Teachers also coped through collegial conversation, advice-seeking, brief pauses, and self-calming practices that helped them manage stress. Support from fellow teachers functioned as both an emotional buffer and a practical source of solutions to everyday classroom problems. They stated:

> *"I discuss challenges with my colleagues and share ideas to overcome difficulties." (P1)*
> *"Taking short breaks and practicing mindfulness helps me cope with stress during teaching." (P3)*
> *"I talk with other teachers so I can get advice and support on how to handle classroom problems." (P5)*
> *"Sometimes I relax and ask help from colleagues so I do not get overwhelmed by the pressure in class." (P7)*

*3.3 Insights*

**Theme 1: Personal Growth and Resilience**

Teachers viewed their work in makeshift classrooms as a demanding but formative professional experience. They described becoming more patient, flexible, and resilient as they learned to work under persistent constraint. They mentioned:

> *"I have learned to be more patient and flexible in dealing with diverse learners." (P1)*
> *"Teaching in makeshift classrooms has made me resourceful and resilient." (P3)*
> *"This has been a major experience that helped me improve my teaching skills and my character." (P5)*
> *"Even if the situation is difficult, I learned to become resilient and flexible in my class." (P7)*

**Theme 2: The Importance of Creativity**

Teachers emphasized that creativity was essential rather than optional in temporary learning spaces. They associated creative practice with the ability to keep lessons understandable, engaging, and meaningful despite the lack of conventional classroom supports. They verbalized:

*"Creativity allows me to make learning meaningful despite resource limitations." (P2)*
*"I constantly find innovative ways to present lessons so that students remain engaged." (P4)*
*"Creativity is really necessary so students can stay involved even when equipment is lacking." (P6)*
*"Sometimes I need to develop different approaches so students can understand and enjoy the lesson." (P10)*

**Theme 3: The Need for Institutional Support**

Teachers repeatedly noted that personal commitment alone was insufficient for sustained teaching effectiveness in makeshift classrooms. They identified administrative assistance, collegial support, professional development, and additional resources as necessary conditions for better practice. They stated:

*"Support from the school and colleagues helps me manage the difficulties more effectively." (P1)*
*"Professional development and additional resources would greatly enhance my teaching in these environments." (P4)*
*"It would be better if there were help from the school administration and other teachers so classroom problems could be addressed." (P5)*
*"Sometimes I really need support from the school and DepEd so teaching in a makeshift classroom can be more effective." (P7)*

## 4. Discussion

The findings show that makeshift classrooms shape teaching through a combination of material deprivation, spatial restriction, and emotional demand. The teachers' accounts affirm that resource scarcity is not a minor inconvenience but a direct pedagogical constraint because it affects explanation, task design, and the range of possible representations that can be offered during instruction. This pattern resonates with Lucić's (2021) analysis of improvised educational spaces, where fragile infrastructures altered not only where teaching occurred but how it could occur. It also aligns with Campbell's (2020) argument that learning spaces influence pedagogy by enabling or limiting particular forms of interaction, movement, and participation.

The prominence of classroom organization and space constraints further suggests that the physical environment should be treated as part of instructional design rather than as a separate facilities issue. When teachers cannot move freely, arrange desks flexibly, or monitor learners closely, classroom management becomes structurally harder before it becomes a matter of personal skill. In this sense, the teachers' narratives support the insight that practice is mediated by conditions external

to the individual teacher, a point that fits well with the cultural-historical view articulated by Cong-Lem (2022). In an activity-system perspective, inadequate space and missing materials are not background variables; they are disruptions in the mediational system through which teaching is enacted.

The study also highlights how constrained environments intensify emotional labor. Participants described exhaustion, pressure, and the need to remain professionally composed even when the classroom environment undermined their work. This finding is consistent with Chang's (2020) account of how emotion regulation burdens can contribute to burnout, and with Flores's (2020) observation that resilience often emerges in response to adversity rather than in its absence. The present findings add a spatial dimension to that literature by showing that professional strain in this context was inseparable from makeshift conditions themselves. Hopman and Clark (2023) similarly argued that teachers' emotional well-being is foundational to educational continuity during crisis-linked disruption, which helps explain why the participants in this study linked fatigue with instructional challenge so closely.

At the same time, the coping strategies identified in the study reveal a strong repertoire of situated agency. Resource improvisation allowed teachers to preserve instructional quality with recycled, handmade, or adapted materials, echoing Lucić's (2021) finding that educational continuity in disrupted settings often depends on locally generated pedagogical invention. The teachers' adaptive management strategies likewise show that flexibility was not an abstract disposition but a concrete organizational practice involving grouping, pacing, peer support, and layout adjustment. Such strategies reflect what MacIntyre et al. (2020) described as coping through active adjustment and what phenomenological approaches frame as practical meaning-making within lived situations (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Peer and emotional support emerged as another critical resource, suggesting that collegial relations partially compensate for infrastructural weakness. Teachers in the study turned to colleagues not only for technical ideas but also for reassurance and emotional containment. This pattern is compatible with evidence that supportive work environments protect teacher well-being and job satisfaction by buffering stress and reducing isolation (Buonomo et al., 2022). In contexts where the classroom itself is fragile, the social environment of the school becomes even more important because it provides the relational infrastructure that the physical environment fails to supply.

The insight themes deepen the interpretation of the findings by showing that prolonged exposure to makeshift teaching conditions can reshape professional identity. Teachers described becoming more patient, flexible, and resilient, which mirrors Flores's (2020) characterization of teachers as professionals who often sustain practice through adaptive persistence in adverse settings. Yet these narratives should not be romanticized. The teachers' growth was real, but it developed in response to avoidable constraint. Their reflections therefore carry a dual message: hardship can cultivate professional strength, but institutions should not rely on hardship as a normal pathway to teacher development.

Creativity occupied a central place in the teachers' reflections, indicating that pedagogical innovation in makeshift classrooms is often necessity-driven. Creativity here referred less to novelty for its own sake and more to the capacity to redesign explanation, materials, and activity structures under pressure. This finding can be understood through Campbell's (2020) view that teaching responds dynamically to environmental affordances, and through Braun and Clarke's (2022) emphasis on attending carefully to patterned meaning across narratives rather than reducing creativity to an isolated trait. In this dataset, creativity functioned as a relational practice that connected material scarcity, learner engagement, and teacher agency.

Finally, the repeated call for institutional support suggests that effective response to makeshift classrooms must move beyond admiration for teacher resilience. Participants explicitly named the need for administrative assistance, professional development, and additional resources. Their accounts support the argument that teacher commitment cannot substitute for structural provision. Buonomo et al. (2022) showed that supportive school climates matter for teacher well-being, while Hopman and Clark (2023) underscored the educational significance of emotionally and organizationally responsive systems. The present study extends those insights by indicating that teachers in temporary learning spaces need context-specific support that addresses materials, training, and psychosocial sustainment together rather than in isolation.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that teaching in makeshift classrooms is a deeply layered professional experience shaped by inadequate resources, cramped and overcrowded space, and sustained emotional demand. Elementary school teachers in Mati South District did not merely endure these conditions; they responded through improvisation, adaptive management, collegial support, and reflective resilience. Their accounts show that instructional continuity in temporary learning spaces depends heavily on teacher creativity and commitment, but they also make clear that such commitment has limits when unsupported by material and institutional conditions.

## Acknowledgment

Sincere appreciation is given to all peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped the author to improve the quality of the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

Alhazmi, A. A., & Kaufmann, A. (2022). Phenomenological qualitative methods applied to the analysis of cross-cultural experience in novel educational social contexts. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, Article 785134. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.785134

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology, 9*(1), 3-26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 24*(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Buonomo, I., Pansini, M., Cervai, S., & Benevene, P. (2022). Compassionate work environments and their role in teachers' life satisfaction: The contribution of perceived collective school performance and burnout. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*(21), Article 14206. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114206

Campbell, L. (2020). Teaching in an inspiring learning space: An investigation of the extent to which one school's innovative learning environment has impacted on teachers' pedagogy and practice. *Research Papers in Education, 35*(2), 185-204. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1568526

Chang, M.-L. (2020). Emotion display rules, emotion regulation, and teacher burnout. *Frontiers in Education, 5*, Article 90. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00090

Cong-Lem, N. (2022). Vygotsky's, Leontiev's and Engeström's cultural-historical (activity) theories: Overview, clarifications and implications. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, 56*(4), 1091-1112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-022-09703-6

Flores, M. A. (2020). Surviving, being resilient and resisting: Teachers' experiences in adverse times. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 50*(2), 219-240. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2019.1664399

Hopman, J., & Clark, T. (2023). Finding a way: What crisis reveals about teachers' emotional wellbeing and its importance for education. *Education Sciences, 13*(11), Article 1141. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13111141

Lindo, M. R., & Cutad, C. A. (2024). Impact of Generative AI on Self-Regulated Learning and Cognitive Offloading. *IMCC Journal of Science, 4*(2), 18-22. https://doi.org/10.65931/c7k2p5z9

Lindo, M. R., & Panes, R. (2024). The Hallucination Effect: Correlating Generative AI Usage Frequency with Source Verification Habits among Grade 12 STEM Researchers. *IMCC Journal of Science, 4*(2), 9-11. https://doi.org/10.65931/d4n7x2h9

Lucić, L. (2021). War schools: Teaching innovations implemented across makeshift educational spaces during the military siege of Sarajevo. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 29*(4), 573-592. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1768582

MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S. (2020). Language teachers' coping strategies during the COVID-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. *System, 94*, Article 102352. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352

Rahimi, S., & Khatooni, M. (2024). Saturation in qualitative research: An evolutionary concept analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances, 6*, Article 100174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnsa.2024.100174

Thomas, S. P., & Sohn, B. K. (2023). From uncomfortable squirm to self-discovery: A phenomenological analysis of the bracketing experience. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231191635

*Author Contributions:* Silatan, P.G., Baguio, J.; Study design, method conception, data collection, data analysis and manuscript writing