Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Distressed Areas during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study

Jerome F. Pagliawan

Samar State University, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, particularly affecting teachers assigned to geographically isolated and distressed areas. This study explored the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in remote communities of Catbalogan City during the pandemic. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study examined teachers' challenges, adaptive strategies, and approaches to sustaining relationships with learners amid distance learning and health risks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with **10 purposively selected elementary teachers aged 25–54 years with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 28 years** and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed five major themes: (1) emotional strain and uncertainty, (2) pedagogical adaptation to alternative learning modalities, (3) heightened health consciousness, (4) psychological and emotional challenges, and (5) strengthened teacher–student relationships. Participants shared experiences of stress, fear, and exhaustion, yet demonstrated resilience and commitment in sustaining educational continuity. Direct narratives from participants highlighted the realities of teaching in distressed communities during a global crisis. The study underscores the critical role of educators during crises and highlights the need for enhanced institutional support, mental health services, and equitable access to learning resources in remote communities.

Keywords: COVID-19, elementary teachers, phenomenology, distance learning, remote education, teacher resilience, crisis education

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruptions in education systems globally, compelling schools to suspend face-to-face instruction and rapidly transition to alternative learning modalities. In the Philippines, the Department of Education implemented modular distance learning, online instruction, radio-based instruction, and television-based learning to ensure continuity of education while minimizing public health risks.

For teachers assigned in geographically isolated and distressed areas, these transitions intensified existing inequalities in access to resources and support. Limited internet connectivity, scarcity of instructional materials, and increased health risks posed significant challenges to the delivery of quality education. Consequently, teachers assumed expanded roles—not only as educators but also as facilitators, community frontliners, and providers of psychosocial support.

Existing literature has documented the challenges teachers faced during the pandemic, particularly in adapting instructional practices, maintaining student engagement, and safeguarding their well-being. However, there remains a paucity of research focusing specifically on the lived experiences of elementary teachers in distressed and remote contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study explores how these educators navigated the complexities of teaching during a global health crisis while comparing the findings with emerging global literature on crisis-responsive education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to:

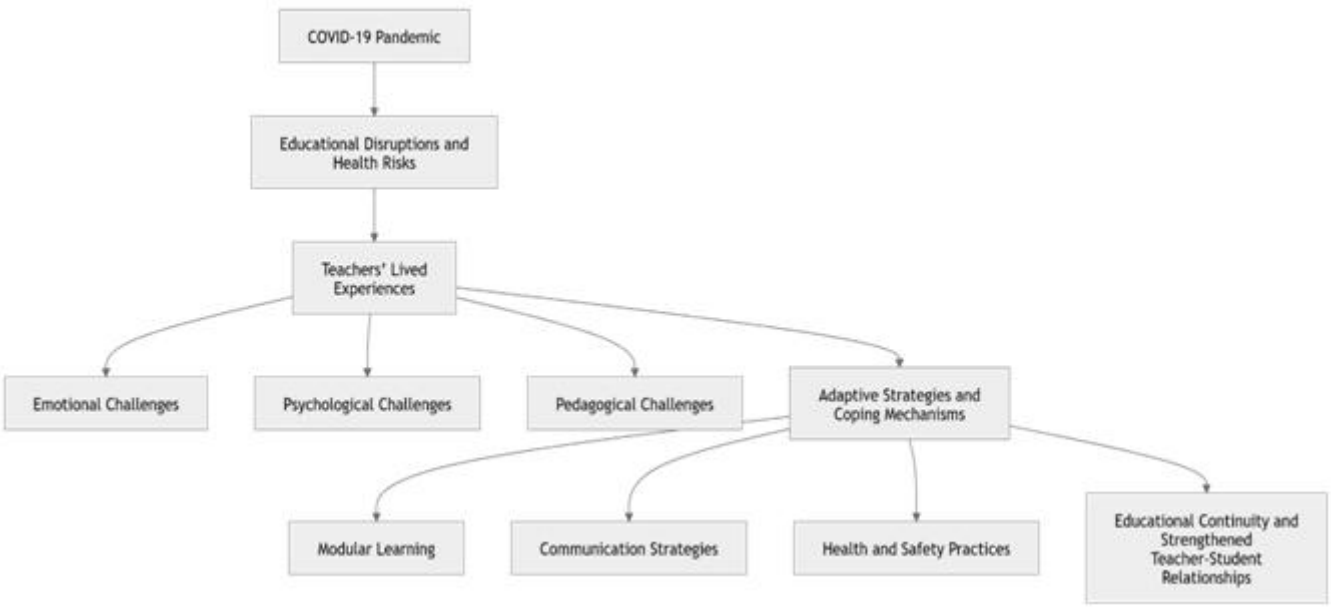
1. Explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. Identify the adjustments made by teachers in response to health risks and educational changes; and
3. Examine how teachers sustained relationships and rapport with students in a distance learning environment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic created educational disruptions that affected teachers' professional responsibilities, emotional well-being, and instructional delivery. Teachers' lived experiences were shaped by challenges such as limited resources, health risks, and distance learning demands. In response, teachers developed adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms that influenced educational continuity and teacher–student relationships.

Conceptual Framework Diagram



METHODOLOGY

Because the study involved a small, context-specific group of teachers, the purpose of the phenomenological inquiry was depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. The participants' shared experiences were interpreted within the particular conditions of remote communities in Catbalogan City, allowing the study to identify meanings that may be relevant to similarly situated educational contexts while recognizing that transferability depends on contextual similarity.

The study followed a descriptive phenomenological orientation in presenting participants' accounts as closely as possible to their expressed experiences. During interpretation, the researchers repeatedly returned to the interview narratives, identified significant statements, grouped related meanings, and synthesized these meanings into thematic descriptions of the phenomenon. Reflexive notes were maintained to make the researchers' assumptions and interpretive decisions visible and to reduce the possibility that the findings would be driven primarily by researcher preconceptions. The central phenomenological aim was to describe the common meaning of teaching in geographically isolated and distressed communities during a period of health and educational disruption.

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture and interpret the essence of elementary teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological approach was selected because the inquiry focused not simply on the occurrence of pandemic-related challenges, but on how teachers experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to those challenges in their everyday professional lives. The

analysis therefore moved from individual descriptions toward recurring meanings shared across participants, while retaining the contextual details that shaped those meanings.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture and interpret the essence of teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals make meaning of significant life events.

Participants

The participants consisted of **10 elementary school teachers** assigned in geographically isolated and distressed areas of Catbalogan City. Their ages ranged from **25 to 54 years old**, and their teaching experience ranged from **3 to 28 years**. Six participants were female and four were male. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants who directly experienced teaching during the pandemic and who were actively involved in alternative learning delivery modalities.

The inclusion of participant demographics strengthened the methodological rigor of the study by contextualizing the perspectives and experiences shared during the interviews.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Key guiding questions included:

- "Can you describe your experience as an elementary teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?"
- "How did you adjust to the risks and changes brought by the pandemic?"
- "How did you maintain communication and rapport with your students?"

Interviews were conducted in compliance with health protocols and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed.

Researcher involvement was maintained throughout transcription review, coding, comparison of interpretations, and theme refinement. Disagreements or differences in interpretation were examined through discussion and rechecking of the relevant participant narratives. An audit trail consisting of interview protocols, coding records, thematic organization, and reflexive notes was maintained to document analytical decisions. These procedures were intended to minimize interpretive bias and provide a transparent account of how raw interview data were transformed into the final themes.

The initial codes were compared across interviews and grouped according to conceptual similarity. Candidate themes were then developed by examining relationships among codes and by asking whether each emerging theme represented a coherent pattern of meaning across the participants' accounts. Themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete interview narratives, refined where meanings overlapped, and given labels that reflected their central experiential content. The researchers returned to the original narratives during this process to ensure that thematic interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than in predetermined categories.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The process began with transcription and repeated reading of the interview accounts to achieve familiarity with the data. The researchers then identified meaningful statements and assigned initial codes to segments that described participants' experiences, emotions, adaptations, safety practices, and relationships with learners.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. Responses were transcribed, coded, categorized, and organized into themes and subthemes to identify recurring patterns and meanings.

Trustworthiness was addressed through procedures corresponding to credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and validation of interview transcripts to ensure that participants' accounts were represented accurately.

Dependability was strengthened through documentation of the interview protocol, data collection procedures, coding stages, theme development, and revisions made during analysis. An audit trail was maintained so that the progression from interview data to codes, categories, and final themes could be followed.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive notes and repeated reference to participant narratives during interpretation. The researchers deliberately examined whether interpretations were supported by the data and used discussion and rechecking of narratives when differences in interpretation arose. These procedures were intended to reduce the influence of researcher assumptions and make the analytical process more transparent.

Trustworthiness of the Study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

These experiences are consistent with Rasmitadila et al. (2020), who documented teachers' uncertainty during the abrupt shift in educational delivery. However, the present findings add a contextual dimension: in geographically isolated communities, uncertainty was closely connected to the practical difficulty of knowing whether learning materials had reached students and whether learners could meaningfully engage with them. Thus, emotional strain was not only an individual reaction to change; it was also produced by limited visibility into learners' actual learning conditions.

"The sudden changes made us feel unprepared and emotionally exhausted."

"I was worried every day because I did not know if my pupils were really learning from the modules."

Participants described an immediate emotional response to the abrupt disruption of familiar teaching routines. Their accounts emphasized uncertainty about whether learners were actually engaging with the modules, concern about declining learning outcomes, and exhaustion associated with having to adjust rapidly to unfamiliar responsibilities. In this study, "emotional strain and uncertainty" refers primarily to the teachers' immediate and situational feelings of worry, hesitation, inadequacy, and uncertainty associated with disrupted instructional delivery.

Emotional Strain and Uncertainty

Participants reported experiencing heightened levels of stress, hesitation, and uncertainty during the sudden transition to distance learning. The absence of face-to-face interaction and the perceived limitations of modular instruction contributed to feelings of inadequacy and concern for student learning outcomes.

One participant shared:

"I was worried every day because I did not know if my pupils were really learning from the modules."

Another participant explained:

"The sudden changes made us feel unprepared and emotionally exhausted."

These findings align with the work of Rasmitadila et al. (2020), who found that teachers worldwide experienced anxiety and uncertainty due to abrupt changes in educational delivery. Similarly, recent global studies conducted in Indonesia, India, and South Africa revealed that teachers in disadvantaged communities experienced emotional fatigue and increased workloads during pandemic-related school closures.

Pedagogical Adaptation to Alternative Modalities

Teachers demonstrated adaptability by employing various instructional approaches, including modular distance learning, radio-based instruction (RBI), television-based instruction (TBI), and limited online platforms. Despite infrastructural challenges, participants utilized creative strategies such as localized learning materials and community-based monitoring to sustain instruction.

One participant stated:

"We delivered modules house-to-house because many learners had no internet access."

Another teacher noted:

"I adjusted my teaching strategies and simplified lessons so parents could also guide the learners."

These findings support recent international studies emphasizing teachers' innovative practices during crises. Research conducted in rural African and Southeast Asian communities similarly highlighted teachers' use of localized and flexible instructional approaches to address technological limitations.

Health Awareness and Safety Practices

Heightened awareness of health protocols emerged as a critical aspect of teachers' experiences. Participants consistently practiced preventive measures such as mask-wearing, sanitation, and physical distancing, particularly during module distribution and home visitations.

A participant recalled:

"Even during home visits, we made sure to wear masks and bring alcohol because we were afraid of getting infected."

The integration of health consciousness into teaching practices underscores the dual responsibility of educators as both instructors and public health advocates. Recent global literature similarly identified teachers as frontliners responsible for both educational continuity and community health promotion during the pandemic.

The finding is consistent with the broader literature cited in the original manuscript on teacher anxiety, burnout, and emotional distress during prolonged school disruption. More importantly, the present study suggests that these psychological experiences were intensified by the remote context, where teachers had to manage educational responsibilities while navigating health concerns, travel or home-visit demands, and limited access to instructional resources. The findings consequently point to the need for institutional support that is sensitive not only to teachers' general mental health needs but also to the specific demands created by geographically isolated assignments.

The distinction between the two themes is therefore temporal and experiential: emotional strain and uncertainty describes teachers' immediate responses to sudden educational changes, while psychological and emotional challenges describes the continuing mental and emotional burden associated with workload, health risks, and the prolonged crisis. The overlap between the two themes was reviewed during analysis, but they were retained because participants' accounts indicated both an initial disruption-related response and a more sustained psychological burden.

"There were times when I cried because the workload was overwhelming and I feared bringing the virus home to my family."

A distinct but related pattern concerned the deeper and more sustained psychological burden associated with prolonged exposure to pandemic risks and work demands. Whereas the preceding theme focuses on immediate uncertainty surrounding instructional disruption, this theme captures experiences of anxiety, fear of infection, emotional exhaustion, and work-related stress that accumulated over time.

Psychological and Emotional Challenges

The pandemic significantly affected teachers' mental health, with participants reporting anxiety, fear of infection, emotional exhaustion, and work-related stress.

One teacher explained:

"There were times when I cried because the workload was overwhelming and I feared bringing the virus home to my family."

These findings are consistent with recent studies from Europe and Latin America showing increased burnout, anxiety, and emotional distress among teachers during prolonged school disruptions. The findings highlight the urgent need for institutional mental health support systems for educators, especially in high-risk and resource-limited environments.

Strengthening Teacher–Student Relationships

Despite physical barriers, teachers actively maintained connections with students through home visits, regular communication with parents, and consistent monitoring. Practices such as "kumustahan" fostered emotional support and sustained learner engagement.

A participant shared:

"We always checked on the learners not only about schoolwork but also about how they were feeling."

Teachers' roles extended beyond academic instruction to include mentorship and caregiving, reinforcing the relational dimension of teaching in times of crisis. Similar findings were observed in recent global studies emphasizing the importance of teacher empathy, emotional support, and community engagement during emergency remote learning.

Integrative Interpretation of the Findings

Taken together, the five themes show that teaching in geographically isolated and distressed communities during the pandemic was not experienced as a set of separate instructional, health, and emotional problems. Instead, the participants described an interconnected experience in which uncertainty about learners' progress, adaptation to alternative modalities, health precautions, psychological burden, and relationship-building continuously shaped one another.

What is distinctive in this study is the way geographical isolation intensified the practical and relational dimensions of crisis teaching. The teachers' accounts show that educational continuity depended not only on selecting an alternative learning modality but also on physically reaching learners, adapting materials to local conditions, communicating with parents, and sustaining "kumustahan" and other forms of relational support. The teacher therefore functioned simultaneously as an instructor, monitor, communicator, and source of psychosocial support. These experiences extend the discussion beyond the general observation that teachers struggled during COVID-19 by showing how remoteness shaped the form that adaptation and resilience took.

The findings also suggest that resilience should not be interpreted as the absence of distress. Participants demonstrated commitment and adaptability while simultaneously reporting fear, exhaustion, and uncertainty. This coexistence is important for interpreting teacher resilience in distressed communities: institutional policies should not rely on teachers' capacity to cope as a substitute for adequate resources, health protection, mental health services, and professional support.

Finally, the study's five themes are analytically connected. Emotional strain and uncertainty reflects the immediate disruption caused by the sudden shift in teaching; pedagogical adaptation reflects teachers' responses to that disruption; health awareness reflects the risks accompanying continued educational contact; psychological and emotional challenges captures the more sustained burden of the crisis; and strengthened teacher–student relationships demonstrates how teachers attempted to preserve the social and human purposes of education despite physical separation.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenological findings indicate that elementary teachers in geographically isolated and distressed areas experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as an interconnected disruption of instructional practice, personal well-being, health security, and teacher–student relationships. The five themes—emotional strain and uncertainty, pedagogical adaptation to alternative modalities, heightened health consciousness, psychological and emotional challenges, and strengthened teacher–student relationships—demonstrate how teachers continuously negotiated the demands of educational continuity under conditions of limited resources and heightened risk.

Their ability to innovate pedagogical strategies, adhere to health protocols, and maintain meaningful relationships with students underscores their indispensable role in ensuring educational continuity during crises. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive institutional support, including mental health services, technological infrastructure, and targeted professional development for teachers in remote communities.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the sample consisted of only 10 elementary teachers from geographically isolated and distressed areas of one city. The findings therefore provide contextual depth but should not be treated as statistically representative of teachers in all remote communities. Transferability to other settings depends on similarities in geography, school resources, community conditions, and pandemic-related experiences.

Second, the study relied on participants' retrospective accounts of their pandemic experiences. Such accounts are valuable for phenomenological inquiry but may be influenced by memory and later reflection. Future studies may strengthen the evidence base by incorporating multiple sources of qualitative data, such as learners, parents, school administrators, and relevant school records.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

1. Strengthening mental health programs for teachers through accessible psychosocial support services;
2. Improving digital infrastructure and resource allocation in geographically isolated areas;
3. Providing continuous professional development on flexible and crisis-responsive teaching strategies;
4. Enhancing school–community partnerships to support student learning during emergencies;
5. Conducting comparative studies between urban and rural teachers to better understand contextual differences in crisis experiences; and
6. Expanding future research to include learners, parents, and school administrators to gain a broader perspective on pandemic-related educational challenges.

REFERENCES

1. Acosta, R. S. (2019). *A phenomenological study of the experiences of elementary Title I teachers' use of digital technology in the classroom* (Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University).
2. Akın, S., Yıldırım, A., & Goodwin, A. L. (2016). Classroom management through the eyes of elementary teachers in Turkey: A phenomenological study. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 16*(3), 771–797. https://doi.org/10.12738/estp.2016.3.0376
3. Barrow, D. M. (2017). *A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of parents of young children with autism receiving special education services* (Doctoral dissertation, Portland State University). https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5919
4. Brubaker, W. M. (2016). *A teacher's journey: A phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of beginning teachers* (Doctoral dissertation, Gardner-Webb University).
5. Cabaguing, A. M. (2017). Motherhood and "studenthood": The lived experiences of college student mothers. *International Review of Social Sciences, 5*(3), 120–128.
6. Garcia, E. (2020). *The pandemic sparked more appreciation for teachers*. Economic Policy Institute.
7. Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and education policy*. Economic Policy Institute.
8. Garner, T. M. (2016). *A phenomenological study of teachers' lived experiences providing intervention for students diagnosed with ADHD* (Doctoral dissertation).
9. Howard, P., & Howard, J. (2012). Pandemic and pedagogy: Elementary school teachers' experience of H1N1 influenza in the classroom. *Phenomenology & Practice, 6*(1), 18–35. https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr19821
10. Kassim, S. R. (2019). Educators behind bars. *Asia Pacific Institute of Advanced Research, 5*(1), 1–11.
11. Quejada, A. B., & Orale, R. L. (2018). Lived experiences of elementary teachers in remote schools. *Journal of Academic Research, 3*(3), 1–13.
12. Rasmitadila, A., et al. (2020). Teachers' perceptions of online learning during COVID-19: A qualitative study. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies, 7*(2), 90–109. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/388
13. World Health Organization. (2020). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic*. https://www.who.int