



Echoes from the Mountain: Understanding Teachers' Struggles and Support Needs in Isolated Schools

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Received: 21.02.2026 | Accepted: 21.03.2026 | Published: 25.03.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19224494](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19224494)

Abstract

Review Article

Conducted during the School Year 2025-2026, this research investigates the professional and personal lived experiences of educators stationed in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), with a specific focus on "last mile" schools in Diffun. As the educational landscape shifts toward inclusive "last mile" reach, teachers in these regions face a unique set of pressures that differ significantly from their urban counterparts. The findings reveal that teaching in these remote regions is a multifaceted challenge characterized by hazardous environmental conditions, including steep, mountainous terrain and roads that become dangerously slippery during inclement weather. Logistically, the total absence of a mobile cellular signal remains a universal barrier, forcing a reliance on localized school Wi-Fi and creating a sense of communication isolation. Instructionally, educators contend with a chronic scarcity of textbooks and a wide range of student comprehension levels, which is further complicated by high rates of student absenteeism. Despite these burdens, the study highlights a profound "mission-driven" resilience among the participants. Teachers employ various adaptive strategies, such as meticulous "safe travel" protocols and ingenious resourcefulness—exemplified by using personal home equipment to prepare materials during utility failures. A critical socio-emotional finding indicates that the ability to return home daily to bond with family acts as a vital psychological buffer against burnout. For those unable to commute, strong communal bonds and peer collaboration serve as essential "protective frameworks. Furthermore, while basic administrative support is present, there is an urgent, unaddressed demand for specialized professional development in differentiated instruction and multi-grade strategies to effectively manage the extreme diversity of learner abilities professional realities of teachers. Recommendations include the institutionalization of a "GIDA Survival Support Package" by the Department of Education, the implementation of targeted pedagogical training, and the enhancement of hazard-based financial welfare. Additionally, the study suggests that local government units should collaborate with telecommunications providers to address the communication blackouts in these areas. Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of moving beyond standard administrative support to provide holistic, localized interventions that address the physical, emotional, and instructional realities of last-mile educators.

Keywords: GIDA teachers (Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas), professional realities of teachers.

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Introduction:

Education systems worldwide face significant challenges in providing equitable and quality education to students in rural and neglected areas, largely due to shortages of skilled teachers, inadequate facilities, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in remote or socioeconomically disadvantaged locations. In the Philippines, Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) schools often suffer from small enrollments, multi-grade classes, poor infrastructure, and limited access to resources, which negatively affect both teaching quality and student outcomes. Teachers in these settings frequently endure long travel times, a lack of educational materials, and personal financial burdens while demonstrating resilience and dedication despite minimal institutional support. Research highlights that these challenges are compounded by local geographic factors such as mountainous terrain and island isolation, which further hinder teacher well-being, motivation, and instructional delivery. Adaptive strategies employed by teachers include flexibility, community collaboration, innovative use of limited resources, and peer support; however, systemic issues like insufficient professional development and resource allocation persist. Understanding the lived experiences of teachers in remote schools is crucial for designing targeted interventions that improve teacher support, infrastructure, and ultimately student access to quality education in these challenging environments Naval, A., & Mito-On, N., 2025.

Methods:

The study utilized a Basic Qualitative Research Design to explore how teachers in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs) interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences, focusing on rich description rather than theory generation. Conducted in mountain barangays of Diffun District, Quirino Province, Philippines, the research context is characterized by rugged terrain, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic

challenges that shape educational delivery. Ten public school educators with 3 to 10 years of experience were purposively sampled to provide in-depth insights, ensuring data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews guided by topics on demographics, challenges, adaptive strategies, and support mechanisms; interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with field notes taken for contextual richness. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's reflexive framework was conducted using NVivo software to systematically code and develop themes, with trustworthiness ensured through member checking, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and thick contextual descriptions. Triangulation of interview transcripts with field notes further enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings Regmi, B., 2024.

Result and Discussions:

The results reveal the complex realities faced by teachers in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area (GIDA) schools, highlighting persistent challenges such as limited resources, difficult accessibility, multi-grade teaching, and professional isolation. Despite these obstacles, educators demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability, and a strong commitment to their students and communities. Key themes include logistical hardships like long travel times and poor infrastructure, emotional and financial sacrifices made by teachers, and the use of innovative coping strategies such as community collaboration and flexible teaching methods.

The findings also emphasize the critical need for systemic support through improved infrastructure, targeted professional development, and resource provision to sustain teacher motivation and enhance educational quality. These insights align with broader research showing that while teachers in remote areas face significant barriers, their dedication often drives educational progress under challenging conditions. Addressing these issues through policy and programmatic interventions is

essential to improve both teacher well-being and student outcomes in isolated settings (Datulio, et al., 2025).

A. NVivo Concept Map on the Lived Experiences of the GIDA Teachers

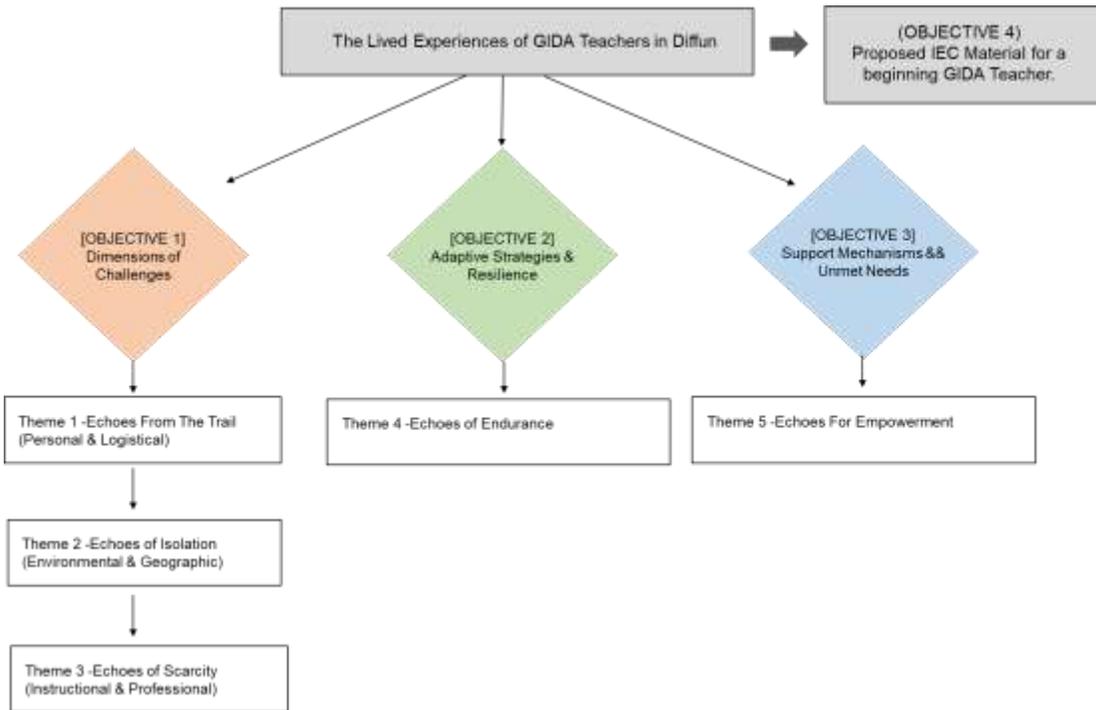


Figure 1. Concept Map of the GIDA Teachers' Lived Experiences

Theme 1: Echoes from the Trail: Physical and Residential Challenges

This theme captures the profound personal and logistical challenges teachers face regarding their placement and transit. The narratives revealed that assigning a teacher to a GIDA school forces them into one of two difficult lifestyle realities, each carrying its own physical and emotional weight.

Sub-theme 1.1: Mountain Commutes and Daily Strain

For commuting teachers assigned to geographically isolated schools, daily travel becomes more than a

routine—it constitutes a structural and occupational burden embedded in their professional reality. Participants described the physical exhaustion, financial strain, and safety risks associated with navigating steep, slippery, and poorly maintained roads. One teacher characterized the school as a “last mile” destination, emphasizing the compounded physical and economic costs of travel. Another noted that the hazardous road conditions demand constant vigilance, framing the journey as the most difficult aspect of the job. The lived accounts—such as riding a motorcycle uphill for 40 minutes over rocky terrain and arriving at school physically numb—illustrate how energy is depleted even before instructional tasks begin.

"Every single day is a test of endurance. I ride my motorcycle for 40 minutes uphill, bouncing over rocks. Sometimes my arms and back are numb before I even write my first lesson on the board. A large chunk of my salary just goes to gasoline and motorcycle maintenance." (Participant 3, 5 years in service)

Recent literature affirms that teachers assigned to remote and mountainous areas frequently experience transportation-related stress, financial depletion, and heightened occupational fatigue, which may contribute to burnout and reduced instructional efficacy (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). Travel hardship is increasingly recognized as a hidden workload factor that disproportionately affects rural educators, particularly in developing contexts where infrastructure remains underdeveloped (OECD, 2022). Thus, the "daily climb" is not merely a logistical inconvenience but a structural challenge that shapes teachers' physical well-being, financial stability, and overall professional sustainability.

Sub-theme 1.2: Adjusting to Life On-Site

Teachers who find daily commuting unsustainable often opt to reside on-site during the workweek, transforming classrooms into temporary living spaces. While this arrangement reduces travel fatigue, it introduces emotional and psychosocial costs. Participants described profound homesickness, loneliness, and the emotional strain of being separated from their families for extended periods. Living in makeshift quarters—often without adequate heating, privacy, or basic amenities—underscores the depth of sacrifice embedded in their professional commitment. One participant reflected on enduring cold and isolation at night while missing her children, framing the decision as part of her vocational calling.

"I decided to just stay here in the classroom during the week. It's too expensive and exhausting to go down the mountain every day. At night, it gets very cold and lonely. I miss my kids terribly, but this is the reality of my calling if I want to keep teaching here." (Participant 8, 10 years in service)

Empirical studies highlight that prolonged family separation and social isolation are significant predictors of emotional exhaustion among rural educators (Burić & Kim, 2021; Education International, 2023). Teachers stationed in remote communities often experience diminished work–life balance and weakened social support systems, both of which are critical protective factors against stress and attrition (OECD, 2022). While residing on-site may demonstrate resilience and dedication, it also reveals systemic gaps in housing provisions and institutional support. The sacrifice of home life, therefore, becomes both a testament to teachers' commitment and a reflection of structural inequities within geographically isolated educational contexts.

Theme 2: Echoes of Isolation: Environmental and Communication Barriers

Beyond the logistics of travel, the environmental context of the Diffun highlands dictates much of the teachers' daily anxieties. This theme highlights how physical geography and the lack of modern infrastructure isolate these educators from the rest of the world.

Sub-theme 2.1: Safe Passage through Risky Routes

The data showed that the weather significantly exacerbates the geographical challenges. During the rainy season, the mountain trails transform into hazardous, slippery slopes, posing a direct threat to the teachers' lives and safety.

"During the rainy season, the dirt roads turn into mudslides. There was a time my motorcycle slipped and I almost fell off the ravine. You literally risk your life just to report to work when the typhoons hit." (Participant 2, 3 years in service)

There is strong evidence across multiple regions that rainy seasons significantly worsen geographical hazards—especially via mudslides/landslides—which directly threaten those who must travel mountain trails for work or essential services such as teaching. These findings align closely with your participant's testimony about risking life on

treacherous roads during typhoons or heavy rain (Vega, J., Barco, J., & Hidalgo, C., 2024).

Sub-theme 2.2: Coping with Connectivity Gaps

A universally shared anxiety among the participants is the total absence of a cellular signal. This "digital void" creates a severe logistical barrier, isolating teachers from emergency services, the DepEd Division Office, and their personal support networks.

"Once you reach the school, you are completely cut off. No signal, no text, no calls. If an emergency happens back home or if a student gets seriously injured here, we have no way to call for help immediately. You feel entirely on your own." (Participant 5, 4 years in service)

The absence of cellular signal, described as a "digital void," creates significant isolation and logistical challenges for teachers, cutting them off from emergency services, administrative support, and personal networks. Research on nomophobia highlights how disconnection from mobile phones can increase feelings of loneliness and reduce self-esteem, underscoring the psychological impact of such connectivity gaps (Baby, N., Sharma, S., Rathod, P., Ukey, U., Gupta, J., Narlawar, U., Rajnita, K., Nair, D., & Vamadevan, A. (2025). Studies also discuss how digital voids emerge when individuals are immersed in digital networks but face physical disconnection, which can disrupt care and social support systems even in geographically close settings (Woods, O., & Shee, S., 2021). Efforts to bridge digital divides in remote communities, such as Malaysia's eBario Project, emphasize the importance of community involvement and appropriate technology deployment to improve connectivity and reduce isolation (Yeo, A., Hazis, F., Zaman, T., Songan, P., & Ab-Hamid, K. (2012). These findings collectively illustrate that the lack of cellular connectivity not only hampers communication but also exacerbates emotional and logistical difficulties for isolated populations like rural teachers. Addressing these gaps requires integrated technological and social strategies to ensure access to critical services and support networks (Woods, O., & Shee, S., 2021).

Theme 3: Echoes of Scarcity: Instructional and Resource Challenges

This theme transitions from the physical environment to the classroom, addressing the professional and instructional challenges. Teaching in these isolated environments requires educators to confront systemic gaps in educational resources and diverse student needs simultaneously.

Sub-theme 3.1: Meeting Diverse Student Needs

Participants highlighted the extreme instructional complexity of managing multi-grade classrooms or handling learners with vastly different proficiency levels in one setting. The struggle of teaching students who grasp concepts quickly alongside those requiring deep reading remediation is a defining characteristic of their daily routine.

"In one room, I am teaching fractions to Grade 5 and basic reading to Grade 4. It's a juggling act. You have fast learners getting bored, and struggling readers needing all your attention at the same time. It stretches your pedagogical skills to the limit." (Participant 1, 6 years in service)

Participants' experiences of managing multi-grade classrooms reflect the extreme instructional complexity of teaching students with widely varying proficiency levels simultaneously. Research shows that multi-grade teaching requires differentiated instruction strategies, such as tiered assignments, to address diverse readiness levels effectively and improve academic outcomes (Comedia, J., Alvarez, M., Pinca, E., Torres, M., & Cabili, Z. (2025). Teachers often face challenges related to limited training, insufficient policy support, and behavioral management in these settings, which can undermine their self-efficacy and complicate classroom management (Qangule, T., & Letuma, M., 2025). The need to balance quick learners with those requiring remediation demands adaptive strategies like peer tutoring, group work, and clear routines, but inconsistent implementation highlights gaps in professional development tailored to multi-grade contexts (Tahir, N., Saad, M., Razak, R., & Satimin, O. (2025). Studies also emphasize that these challenges contribute to teacher burnout and workload stress but can foster creativity and

resilience when adequate support is provided Galve, J., Iballa, J., Galon, M., Casimsiman, R., Casimsiman, R., Amparo, M., Duetes, R., Geraldizo, I., & Ampo, W., (2025). Overall, meeting diverse student needs in multi-grade classrooms requires targeted teacher training, contextualized pedagogical approaches, and systemic support to ensure effective instruction and learner engagement Ares-Ferreirós, M., Martínez-Iglesias, J., & Bernárdez-Gómez, A., (2025).

Sub-theme 3.2: Overcoming Material Shortages

Teachers unanimously reported a chronic shortage of essential learning tools, particularly textbooks, modules, and multimedia equipment. The absence of electricity or reliable technology severely hinders the implementation of the modern, interactive teaching methods expected by the curriculum.

"We don't have enough books. Sometimes, five students share one torn textbook. I want to show them educational videos as they do in the lowlands, but we have no electricity most days and no projector. I just draw everything on the blackboard." (Participant 7, 7 years in service)

Teachers face a chronic shortage of essential learning tools such as textbooks, modules, and multimedia equipment, which severely limits their ability to implement modern, interactive teaching methods. The lack of reliable electricity and technology infrastructure further hinders the use of digital tools that are increasingly expected by contemporary curricula, Gichuhi, L. (2025). While advanced digital technologies like AI, IoT, and smart sensors are transforming higher education and STEM learning environments, access to these tools remains uneven, especially in low-resource settings Boltsi, A., Kalovrektis, K., Xenakis, A., Chatzimisios, P., & Chaikalis, C., (2024). Studies highlight that many educators have limited training and support to effectively integrate available technology into instruction, despite recognizing its potential to enhance student engagement and motivation Chen, Z., & Singh, C., (2025). The digital divide is particularly pronounced in low-income regions where internet connectivity and device availability are inconsistent, exacerbating educational inequities.

Junger, A., De Andrade, S., De Carvalho Fontana, C., Correa, R., & De Alcântara Thimóteo, A. (2023). Addressing these challenges requires not only investment in infrastructure but also ongoing professional development and context-sensitive policies to ensure equitable access to learning technologies Teräs, M., Suoranta, J., Teräs, H., & Curcher, M., (2020).

Theme 4: Echoes of Endurance: Adaptive Strategies and Support Systems

Despite overwhelming systemic and geographic barriers, the narratives revealed that GIDA teachers are not merely passive victims of their circumstances; they are highly proactive problem-solvers. This theme captures the architecture of their resilience.

Sub-theme 4.1: Innovative Teaching Techniques

The data highlighted immense personal initiative, often at a financial cost to the teachers. To bridge the gap in instructional materials, teachers frequently utilize their own resources, relying on "workarounds" to ensure learning continues despite the scarcity.

"If I don't print the modules at my own house using my own money, the kids will have nothing to write on. I bring my heavy power bank every Monday to charge my phone so I can at least play downloaded audio lessons for them. We make do with what we have." (Participant 4, 3 years in service)

Teachers often demonstrate significant personal initiative by using their own financial resources to fill gaps in instructional materials, creating "workarounds" to ensure learning continues despite shortages Davis, O., White, B., & Brown, C., (2025). In remote or resource-limited settings, educators adapt by innovating with available tools and collaborating with peers, which fosters resilience and professional growth even amid technological constraints Xerri, D., Kamali, J., & Mohebbi, H., (2025). This self-reliance is critical as many teachers face limited access to formal support or adequate digital infrastructure, compelling them to invest personally in materials and technology Nesibeli, A.,

2025). While these efforts sustain instruction, they also highlight systemic inequities that place undue burden on teachers rather than addressing root causes through institutional investment. Professional development programs that emphasize digital competence and collaborative problem-solving can help teachers better navigate these challenges, but do not fully replace the need for material support (Nesibeli, A., 2025). Overall, teacher agency and resourcefulness are vital but insufficient without broader structural changes to provide equitable access to instructional resources (Davis, O., White, B., & Brown, C., 2025).

Sub-theme 4.2: Personal Coping Mechanisms

To combat the emotional toll, burnout, and profound loneliness (especially for on-site residents), teachers rely heavily on distinct socio-emotional anchors. These coping mechanisms are vital for maintaining their mental health and intrinsic motivation.

"What keeps me sane? Music. At night, when it's pitch black and quiet in the mountains, I just play my guitar. And for those of us who commute, the moment I get home on Friday and see my family at the dinner table, all the exhaustion disappears. They are my anchor." (Participant 9, 8 years in service)

Teachers cope with burnout and loneliness by relying heavily on socio-emotional anchors such as social support, hope, and gratitude, which are linked to lower burnout levels, while loneliness and a sense of entitlement increase burnout risk (Einav, M., Confino, D., Geva, N., & Margalit, M., 2024). Adaptive coping strategies include problem-solving, seeking social support, and emotion-focused approaches that promote well-being, whereas avoidant or disengagement coping correlates with higher stress and negative emotions like loneliness (Wang, H., Lee, S., & Hall, N., 2021). Interventions such as mindfulness-based programs, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and stress management training have shown effectiveness in reducing teacher stress and emotional exhaustion (Agyapong, B., Brett-MacLean, P., Burbach, L., Agyapong, V., & Wei, Y., 2023). Emotional skills development and interpersonal coping strategies that enhance relationships at school also help mitigate burnout and

improve teachers' mental health (Martínez, J., Méndez, I., Ruiz-Esteban, C., Fernández-Sogorb, A., & García-Fernández, J., 2020). Common coping mechanisms reported include peer and family support, time management, collaboration with colleagues, exercise, hobbies, and problem-solving activities; however, their effectiveness varies and often requires stronger institutional support (Tagayon, P., & Obiso, D., 2025). Overall, maintaining mental health and intrinsic motivation depends on a combination of personal resilience factors and systemic interventions that address both individual coping and workplace conditions, (Saranya, J. (2025)).

Theme #5: Echoes for Empowerment: Advocacy for Strengthened Institutional and Community Support Systems

While the narratives of the participants heavily underscored their remarkable adaptability and individual resilience, the data also revealed a critical caveat: teacher resilience must not be treated as a substitute for systemic support. Under this theme, the Echoes for Empowerment represent the participants' direct articulation of the scaffolding they require to sustain their commitment to "last mile" education. The thematic analysis generated two distinct nodes concerning support mechanisms: the vital, existing informal support from the local community, and the urgent, unmet demands for formal administrative intervention.

Sub-theme 5.1: Community Partnership as a Critical Support Network

The data highlighted that the most immediate and effective support system for GIDA educators in Diffun is not necessarily institutional, but communal. Participants consistently described the local parents and barangay officials as their primary safety net. Because these communities recognize the sacrifice of the teachers, a profound reciprocal relationship is formed. The narratives suggest that community integration goes beyond mere cooperation; it is an active survival mechanism. Parents provide physical labor for school repairs, offer locally grown food to

offset the teachers' living expenses, and ensure their safety within the mountainous terrain.

As one teacher profoundly expressed:

"The government might forget us up here sometimes, but the parents never do. When the roof of my classroom was blown away by the typhoon, it was the fathers who climbed up to fix it the very next morning. They bring us root crops so we don't go hungry during the week. That kind of support is what keeps my heart in this profession." (Participant 6, 4 years in service)

This sub-theme indicates that any localized intervention or support program must actively involve the community leaders, as they are the most reliable pillars of support for these isolated schools.

Sub-theme 5.2: Need for Structured Administrative and Logistical Assistance

Despite the strong communal bonds, the qualitative findings emphasize that informal support cannot solve structural deficits. The participants articulated a distinct set of needs directed toward the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Local Government Units (LGUs). Chief among these needs is the provision of "administrative and logistical scaffolding." Teachers voiced the necessity for consistent, risk-reflective hazard pay that accurately compensates for the daily physical dangers they face. Furthermore, they echoed an urgent need for infrastructural investments, specifically satellite-based internet connectivity and solar-powered learning equipment, to bridge the digital and pedagogical divide.

A veteran participant summarized this administrative gap:

"We are highly motivated, but motivation alone cannot print modules or send an emergency email. We need the Division Office to provide us with localized training on how to teach multi-grade learners effectively, not just the standard seminars. We also desperately need reliable solar panels and a stable communication line. We just want the basic tools to do our jobs properly." (Participant 10, 8 years in service)

Hence, this theme underscores that to prevent burnout and high turnover rates in mountainous GIDAs, the educational system must transition from merely praising teacher resilience to actively providing tangible, localized, and context-specific resources.

Teaching in geographically isolated schools demands physical readiness, pedagogical flexibility, emotional strength, and strong social connections to navigate complex challenges. Environmental hazards and limited communication infrastructure negatively impact teachers' safety, morale, and professional performance. Instructional difficulties such as managing multi-grade classrooms and scarce resources require specialized skills beyond standard teacher training. Psychosocial well-being is closely tied to support from family, peers, and the community, with community integration acting as a vital protective factor. However, sustained teacher effectiveness depends on more structured institutional support, including context-specific survival materials that address real field conditions. These findings align with research emphasizing the importance of professional development, leadership support, and community involvement in maintaining teacher commitment and effectiveness in remote areas. Saod, A., Rushdi, N., Anoar, A., Aziz, M., & Ismail, A., 2024.

The findings suggest that teacher support in GIDAs must move beyond generalized administrative provisions toward structured, context-sensitive systems. Institutionalization of a comprehensive GIDA Teacher Support Package, including safety equipment, emergency communication solutions, and portable utilities, may significantly reduce physical and financial strain. Division-level offices may also prioritize targeted professional development programs focused on differentiated and multi-grade instruction to directly address classroom realities. Furthermore, policies related to hardship allowances, transportation support, and flexible scheduling during extreme weather conditions may be revisited to enhance teacher welfare. Strengthening school-community partnership programs can further institutionalize the

protective role of communal integration identified in the study.

Future research may examine the long-term retention and well-being outcomes of teachers who receive structured survival support interventions compared to those who do not. Longitudinal studies could explore how commuting and on-site residency arrangements influence professional sustainability over time. Additional research may also assess the effectiveness of targeted multi-grade and differentiated instruction training programs in improving student performance in GIDA contexts. Comparative studies across different provinces may further deepen understanding of contextual variations in teacher support needs.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the faculty and staff of the Graduate School of Quirino State University for their technical support and guidance throughout this project. She also extends her gratitude to Dean and her adviser for their insightful comments and suggestions during the preparation of this manuscript.

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