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Why They Stay: A Narrative Inquiry of Teachers Who Served the Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas

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Abstract. This study uses a qualitative, narrative research design and the indigenous Filipino methodology of *Kwentuhan* (storytelling) to investigate why seven veteran teachers remain in their positions as educators in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA) in the Philippines. The research focus has shifted from why teachers leave (teacher attrition) to what sustains them in continuing to teach for extended periods of time. Using two theoretical frameworks, Self-Determination Theory (1985) and Salutogenic Theories (1979), this study explored how these teachers have sustained themselves throughout their careers as they provide alternative learning systems (ALS) and indigenous peoples' education (IPE). A purposeful, criterion-based sampling strategy was used to recruit participants based on at least five years of continued employment in ALS and/or IPE settings. To add to the methodological validity of this study by decreasing researcher bias, member checking was incorporated into all phases of data collection and during the process of transcribing the interviews verbatim. Additionally, because maintaining ethical standards is paramount when conducting qualitative studies, the researcher maintained strict confidentiality and anonymity for all participants. The thematic analysis found that there was a three stage metamorphosis that occurs to sustain persistence among GIDA teachers; the spectrum of arrival (why they became interested in working as a GIDA teacher); the geography of sacrifice (the challenges they encounter while providing services in GIDA settings); and the realization of relational and cognitive anchors (how they have developed relationships and knowledge bases that compensate for the limited resources available in GIDA settings). These results indicate that developing relational sufficiency can help compensate for the material scarcity that exists in GIDA settings. It is recommended that educational administrators begin to use different forms of non-monetary incentives and develop local recruitment efforts instead of solely relying on monetary incentives. It is also suggested that future research be conducted using longitudinal methods so that researchers may examine

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how teacher resilience develops differently across various geographic regions.

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest problems in education around the world is the equitable distribution of quality teachers willing to teach and be assigned to rural and geographically isolated areas. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 4 (Quality Education), call for every student to receive inclusive and equitable quality education. However, in many countries, including the Philippines, geography continues to be a major factor in determining how well students perform academically. That's particularly true in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs), which can be far from major population centers.

In those areas, "the tyranny of distance" can mean a lack of quality educational resources and qualified personnel (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). Although the Philippine government's Department of Education (DepEd) implemented the Special Hardship Allowance (SHA) as a way to encourage teachers to work in hard-to-reach areas, simply providing a financial incentive is insufficient to prevent high levels of teacher turnover (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). While the stories of teacher exodus and migration to cities continue, a contradictory trend exists: A sizeable number of teachers choose to remain in their posts.

Not only is the context of GIDA defined by physical distance, but also by a combination of socioeconomic and infrastructure deficits. Those assigned to "last mile" schools (schools that are very difficult to reach) in GIDAs typically encounter harsh road conditions, no access to clean drinking water and electricity, and have few materials available to teach with (Abdon, 2025; Calimbo, 2021). The adversity experienced by those who teach in these remote areas is magnified when implementing the Alternative Learning System (ALS).

The mobile teachers responsible for delivering education to out-of-school youth and adults, through the ALS, have to provide instruction to students without a stable classroom environment. Studies have recently documented that the instability faced by ALS implementers is greater than that experienced by other types of educators due to the lack of community learning centers (CLCs) and the burden of creating learning resources relevant to the students' context with little support (Problems Encountered Among Teachers in ALS, 2025).

Furthermore, the interplay between the GIDA and Indigenous Peoples (IP) education creates additional complexities to the educator's role. Not only do educators in the hinterlands serve as instructional leaders, but also as cultural brokers. They must navigate linguistic barriers and integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) into the curriculum (Obida & Cagoco, 2025). The demand for "cultural competence," however, often results in an

emotional and professional burden on the teacher who is not native to the community, further exacerbating the feelings of professional isolation (Mercado, 2021).

Although the challenges faced by educators in remote and disadvantaged areas compound each other, the majority of the existing research literature has concentrated on teacher turnover, identifying the "push factors" that cause teachers to leave (such as poor working conditions, isolation, and burnout) (Nguyen et al., 2020; Lopez & Rivera, 2020; Trinkle, 2018). Understanding teacher attrition is important, but it provides a partial view of the workforce dynamics in remote areas. Research examining the "pull factors" or the internal motivation of teachers who decide to remain in their posts is extremely underrepresented. Shifting the focus of inquiry from "Why do they leave?" to "Why do they stay?" transforms the discussion from a deficit perspective to one of resilience and job embeddedness (Ewton, 2025).

This study will attempt to fill some of the gaps in the research literature by using a narrative inquiry method to examine the experiences of teachers who have taught in GIDA, specifically in the difficult contexts of ALS and IP communities. This research posits that the decision to remain is not simply based on economic necessity but rather on complex, lived narratives of altruism, community integration, and professional identity formation (Tumolva & Pasion, 2025). Understanding these lived experiences will allow policymakers to begin developing holistic strategies for retaining teachers in these marginalized environments that take into account the human dimensions of teaching in remote settings.

The main objective of this research project is to explore, capture, and provide insight into the personal narratives of a select group of teachers who are committed to continuing to work within some of the most difficult Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area (GIDA) districts in the country. A particular focus will be on those teaching students in Alternative Learning Systems (ALS), and Indigenous peoples (IP). As opposed to much of the previous literature, which has explored teacher attrition through the lens of deficit-based perspectives, this research aims to provide insight into the complex motivational influences ("pull factors") that impact the decision-making processes of GIDA educators to remain in the most remote areas of the Philippines.

This study examines the "stay-power" of GIDA educators by using the overall inquiry of what influences GIDA educators' continued commitment to their position. In addition, RQ1 examines how background and arrival stories shape GIDA educators' resilience. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify how GIDA educators make sense of and respond to the unique structural barriers they face (i.e., lack of utility access, pedagogy demands) and transform these challenges into meaningful professional opportunities (RQ2). Specifically, RQ3 identifies individualized motivations to stay (i.e., community involvement, culture immersion, etc.). Lastly, RQ4 explores how the narrative accounts of persistence

can help guide future educational policy initiatives and non-monetary forms of support.

2. Literature Review

When considering how to help improve the retention of teachers in the Philippines' most remote geographic locations – specifically those using the Alternative Learning System (ALS) for Indigenous People (IP) students -- it is crucial to consider how different elements contribute to the factors that encourage teachers to either stay or leave the profession.

2.1 Teacher Retention and “Staying Power.”

Teacher retention in the Philippines, particularly in its most isolated and disadvantaged areas (Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas – GIDA), is a serious concern, especially because of the extremely high turnover rate of teachers, which can lead to what is referred to as professional burnout. The majority of research has focused on the “push” factors that lead teachers away from teaching in these geographically isolated regions (e.g., poor working conditions, isolation), according to McLellan (2026). The “pull” factor, or the internal motivation of teachers that keeps them engaged in teaching, has received less attention.

According to Ewton (2025), changing the focus from “why do teachers leave?” to “why do teachers stay?” helps to shift the conversation from a deficit model of teacher retention to a strength-based model of resilience and job embeddedness. Ultimately, the decision to remain is likely influenced by a complicated narrative of altruistic behavior and community integration rather than simply economic need. Nguyen et al. (2020) and Anog et al. (2024) also assert that connections to the community tend to be better predictors of teacher retention in rural settings than monetary compensation.

2.2 Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA)

In the Philippines, Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) are defined by a set of criteria used by the Department of Health (DOH) Administrative Order No. 2017-0014 and the Department of Education (DepEd), which include: (1) physical barriers created by geographic distance or transportation issues; (2) social and economic disadvantage, including higher-than-average poverty levels; and (3) susceptibility to natural disaster events or conflicts. For this research, the three sites identified met all these requirements. Because each site required over six hours of walking and lacked reliable access to electricity, water, and/or internet connectivity at their respective sites, the resident educators employed there were eligible for a Special Hardship Allowance (SHA).

In addition to being far removed from quality educational resources and trained professionals, GIDA is plagued by socioeconomic and infrastructure issues (e.g., hazardous road conditions; no access to clean water, electricity). Financial incentives, such as the Department of Education's implementation of the Special Hardship Allowance (SHA), have been shown to be inadequate to stem the tide

of teacher turnover in GIDA (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). In addition to the physical distance of GIDA, these areas suffer from significant socioeconomic and infrastructure deficits. For example, Abdon (2025) and Calimbo (2021) describe the extreme physical and emotional labor required for teachers to travel to their school sites.

2.3. Alternative Learning System (ALS) and Pedagogical Scarcity

Teachers serving in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) experience even greater challenges than GIDA teachers. ALS teachers teach without a fixed classroom environment and encounter greater instability than other teachers, primarily due to a lack of community-based learning centers and the responsibility to create local educational resources with minimal institutional support (Problems Encountered Among Teachers in ALS, 2025). Mobile teachers within ALS often function similarly to social workers and engage in "house-to-house" education and blur the boundaries between professional responsibilities and community involvement. Without modern technology, teachers rely on resourcefulness and utilize natural materials (e.g., stones, leaves) to present educational content.

2.4. Indigenous Peoples (IP) Communities and Cultural Brokerage

In addition to teaching, educators within IP communities function as cultural brokers. Obida and Cagoco (2025) highlight that ALS teachers in IP communities must negotiate linguistic differences and incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) into their curricula. The expectation that ALS teachers demonstrate cultural competency can produce a significant amount of emotional stress for teachers who are not indigenous members of the host community. Moreover, Mercado (2021) states that this may exacerbate the sense of professional isolation experienced by many teachers. Despite the potential for emotional exhaustion, however, teachers are more likely to maintain long-term retention if they cultivate a moral commitment to continue to serve the community, which is motivated by a debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) owed to the tribe that has accepted them.

This paper closes the gap in current research on teacher attrition as it is the first to investigate the reasons why teachers persist at their posts in remote (GIDA) school settings in the Philippines through a positive lens (i.e., Salutogenesis). Theoretically, this paper expands upon Self-Determination Theory's model of motivation for persistence by providing an example of how relational relatedness among indigenous peoples can compensate for the lack of resources provided by the education system; thus, providing a new framework for promoting teacher resilience developmentally. From a practical perspective, this paper will provide the Department of Education with alternative models that are based on empirical evidence rather than simply being monetary incentives.

In addition, the department will have access to data-supported recommendations regarding local hiring practices and non-financial forms of support for teachers, such as peer mentoring and mental health retreats. Utilizing indigenous methodology (*Kwentuhan*), this research identifies culturally specific "anchors of

retention" that will assist educators who lead schools that exist in geographic isolation when attempting to promote teacher job embeddedness.

3. Methodology

This section provides instructions on how to cite direct quotations in the text as well as when indented.

3.1 Research Design

The primary methodology for this research, investigating the "Why They Stay" phenomenon, will be a Pure Qualitative Research Paradigm using the Narrative Inquiry Methodology. This is chosen over other methodologies such as Phenomenology (which attempts to uncover the static essence of experiences) and Case Study (which studies a bounded system), as it fits best with the inherent temporality of the teacher's decision to remain at their current school site.

The central methodology for this inquiry will be the Three Dimensional Space Narrative Structure described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) which frames the teacher's experience through the interconnected dimensions of Temporality (examining the continuity of the teacher's past arrival, present struggles, and future plans); Sociality (examining the interaction between the teacher's internal motivation and the social dynamics of the IP community and ALS learners); and Place (contextualizing these narratives within the specific geographical location of the Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area (GIDA)).

The process involved: (1) narrative coding, (2) thematic grouping, and (3) the 'restorying' of raw *Kwentuhan* data into the final thematic accounts. As such, this research goes beyond simply listing factors that contribute to retention and instead unravels the complex, lived stories that describe how teachers develop their professional identity and create a sense of enduring purpose while working in marginalized areas.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Methodology

The targeted population for this research is all public-school educators working under the Department of Education in Bulacan who have been assigned to serve in a geographically isolated disadvantaged area (GIDA) for at least five years. Using the most up-to-date administration records, we estimate there are about 50 educators providing services in ALS and IP-focused schools located in remote areas of the province. A purposive sampling methodology - specifically, criterion sampling- was selected to gather participant narratives. In contrast to quantitative sampling methods, which seek statistically representative samples of populations, criterion sampling was selected in order to ensure that each participant had a lived experience that could provide narrative depth.

3.2.1 Inclusion criteria included: 1. Continuous Service: A minimum of five (5) consecutive years of continuous service in a GIDA; 2. Specialization: Current participation in either ALS education or IP education; 3. Status: "Teacher I to III" or Master Teacher Status to assure a narrative account of professional development within the system.

This resulted in an overall sample of seven (7) veteran teachers (P1-P7). This number meets the standards for Narrative Research methodology, as it emphasizes the intense retelling of an individual's life rather than the broad collection of many individuals.

3.3 Research Locale

This study is to take place within a number of geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) in the Province of Bulacan that have been designated by the Philippine Department of Education as "last mile" status. These GIDAs can only be reached through a hike, habal-habal (a motorcycle), or a boat; they also house indigenous peoples (IP). Both formal schooling sites and informal community learning centers (CLC) settings used for the delivery of the alternative learning system (ALS) will be studied as part of this research project. Both of these types of schooling sites suffer from the same constraints of no electricity and/or internet connection and/standard classroom furniture & equipment, which are referenced throughout the teacher narratives.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

In keeping with the spirit of narrative research, the data for this study will be collected via the informal storytelling method called "Kwentuhan" (storytelling), which is a culturally appropriate way to collect information from participants. Kwentuhan allows participants to share their stories organically while the researcher listens/collaborates in a supportive role.

3.4.1 In-Depth Narrative Interviews:

Phase 1: The Life Story Interview: This phase will focus on the teacher's background, their "story of arrival", and what their initial expectations were for teaching at GIDA.

Phase 2: The Experience Interview: This phase will focus on the teachers' day-to-day experiences as teachers in GIDA; it will also provide insight into the challenges they face due to the lack of resources available and cultural integration issues with the Indigenous Peoples.

Phase 3: The Meaning-Making Interview: This final phase will involve reflection by the teacher regarding why they chose to remain at GIDA despite other colleagues leaving and what they see as their future in terms of continuing to teach at the school.

3.4.2 Instrumentation

The primary instrument for the study was an interview guide developed using a semi-structured format. A group of experts in qualitative research and GIDA education reviewed the interview guide as part of a validation process; they evaluated whether each question was culturally relevant to both the Filipino culture and aligned with the objectives of the research. Kwentuhan (storytelling through narrative), is a type of indigenous research methodology utilized among Filipinos. It allows researchers to create a relaxed atmosphere for participants to discuss their "lived history" without fear of judgment.

3.4.3 Data collection occurred over three stages:

- 1.) Recording: All participants agreed to be recorded during a 60 - 90-minute session where the participant shared their narrative.
- 2.) Transcription: Once the recording was completed, it was transcribed in its entirety. The original language of Taglish (a combination of Tagalog and English) and local dialects were transcribed prior to translation into English. The transcription provided an accurate representation of how participants verbally communicated their experiences within the 'hinterland'.
- 3.) Member checking (credibility): Participants were contacted after completion of the transcript; they were allowed to view the written version of their restoried narrative. They could confirm, correct, or add clarification to the researcher's interpretation of their lived reality.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study will analyze the qualitative data collected from the participants using two qualitative techniques: Narrative Thematic Analysis and Restorying.

Translation of Transcriptions: All of the interviews conducted with the participants (most likely in the local dialect or Tagalog/Filipino) will be transcribed word-for-word and then translated into English.

Restorying: The raw data will be organized by the researcher into a chronological order (i.e., Beginning, Middle, End), so as to create a cohesive retention story for each participant.

Thematic Coding: The stories will be coded to determine the common thematic patterns (e.g., "Joy in Community Acceptance", "Spiritual Call", "Professional Autonomy") in the stories that relate to the research question.

Cross Case Analysis: The individual retention stories will be compared to identifying commonalities in the experiences of all the participants that contribute to the overall phenomenon of "staying" at GIDA.

3.6 Scope, Limitations, and Transferability

The current study has provided rich insight into how the GIDA educator persists. Nevertheless, the study has some constraints. Firstly, the study was based on an examination of seven (7) veteran teachers in one region; the results cannot be generalized statistically to the entire teaching workforce in the Philippines. The study, however, does aim for transferability as per the qualitative criteria.

Although the study focuses on providing a conceptual model of how similar groups of teachers working in similar geographically isolated or indigenous education settings might work, future research can build upon the present study's findings using either longitudinal observation methods or comparative designs. Secondly, all the data collected is dependent on the respondent's own recall of their past experiences. Therefore, future research may wish to conduct longitudinal observational studies or comparative studies across other regions in the Philippines.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in compliance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and local institutional regulations to protect each participant's rights. Educators prior to participation in the "Kwentuhan" sessions, were given a complete explanation of this study's goals and their right to withdraw from the project at any point without consequence. Pseudonyms (P1-P7) were assigned to allow for anonymity while maintaining confidentiality; the identifiers regarding geographic locations and institutions that participated in the study were removed. Finally, researchers made every attempt to promote non-maleficence through creating an empathetic atmosphere in which educators felt comfortable sharing difficult memories from their pasts and did not experience any type of negative emotional or professional consequences resulting from the creation of these narratives.

4. Results and Findings

The data analysis followed a rigorous two-step process consistent with Narrative Inquiry. The first stage involved employing a method called "Restorying" to transform the raw interview transcript into a chronological story (Past-Present-Future) and thereby to allow the researcher to reconstruct the participant's "retention journeys." In other words, the researcher began with their "arrival stories" and progressed through to their "stories of staying" today.

The second stage involved using thematic cross-case analysis. Utilizing inductive coding, the researcher identified commonalities in the seven narratives; these included codes such as "ranking," "the long walk," "contentment," and "assimilation." These commonalities were then grouped into categories and ultimately collapsed into three overarching themes, which directly related to the research question.

4.1 Thematic Map

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map for the developmental progression of teacher retention by GIDA teachers. The thematic map depicts the transformation from an Initial Pragmatic Arrival (Theme 1) to navigating the structural barriers identified in the Geography of Sacrifice (Theme 2), into the relational and cognitive anchors (Theme 3), which will support extended commitment. This thematic map demonstrates that the study found that retention is an ongoing professional development process of transformation as opposed to a singular administrative event.

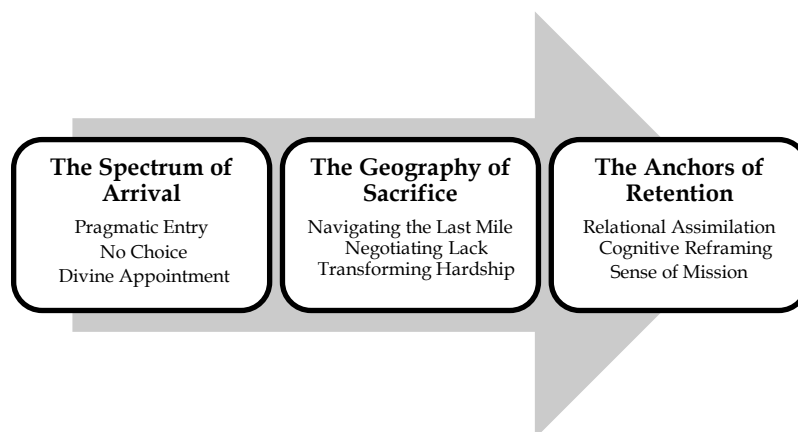


Figure 1: Thematic Map

4.2 Theme 1: The Spectrum of Arrival - From “No Choice” to “Divine Appointment.”

The first phase of this narrative inquiry showed that almost all the participants’ decisions to serve in GIDA resulted from a combination of motivations, not from one motivation alone. In addition to the cross-case analysis, there are many different motivations for serving in GIDA (and therefore many different ways of entering GIDA), which range from simply having no choice due to limited employment options to a call to action based on an idealism about social justice, education, and public service.

For those participants who served in GIDA, their decisions to do so were influenced primarily by factors such as having few alternative employment options, a contractual obligation to serve in GIDA, or being located geographically close to a GIDA school district. Therefore, the primary factor influencing their decision to serve in GIDA was largely a matter of making the most practical decision they could make under the circumstances. On the other end of the continuum, for many of the other participants, the decision to serve in GIDA was made because of a strong sense of idealism about issues related to social justice, service to others, and creating educational equity for students.

There were also several participants whose decisions to serve in GIDA developed over time. Initially, their decisions to serve in GIDA were influenced by similar factors to those described above (e.g., limited job options), just like the barangay health workers in the study by Maminta et. al. (2025). However, during their time working with students in GIDA areas, they began to develop a deeper understanding of the many challenges faced by their students and teachers, which eventually led them to feel a greater sense of responsibility, a stronger sense of identity as a teacher, and a growing sense of moral obligation to continue to work in environments where they were able to help create educational equity for students from low-income backgrounds.

These experiences indicate that while the structure of decision-making can influence the process of becoming a GIDA teacher, the motivation for participating in the decision-making process can be dynamic rather than static. These findings illustrate the complex nature of the decision-making process for

teachers entering GIDA service and show how the intersection of structural factors and individual values can occur over time.

4.2.1 *The Pragmatism of Ranking*

For younger participants, the initial entry was driven by the competitive nature of the public-school hiring process. Teachers 1 and 4 admitted that the GIDA service was a strategic concession.

“Sa totoo lang po, wala po ako choice nung una kasi po gusto ko na po talaga magturo na sa government para sa security. Nung lumabas ang ranking, yun lang ang available. Naiyak po ako nung first una.” (To be honest, I had no choice. I wanted to be in the government service for security. In the ranking, the only available item was here. I cried the first night.) – Teacher 4

Conversely, it is important to note that in this study, the male participants (Teacher 3 and 5) stated they were motivated before accepting their current assignment to be involved in community service and thus saw themselves arriving at their new school site as being there to serve their country, not as an imposition on the school site.

"Naisip ko lang po, kung di ko tatanggapin ung trabaho, sino magtuturo sa kanila, kaya tinanggap ko po habang iniisip ko po na para to sa community, para matulungan sila, yun ang nakakalimutan ng iba." (If we didn't take the job, then who would? So I took the job to do what I thought was my duty to help the community, which other people had forgotten about.) – Teacher 3 (male, 40 years old)

As noted above, these results are consistent with recent research indicating that although economic security (tenure) is a major reason many individuals remain in teaching, tenure alone will not provide adequate reasons to retain quality teachers (Cuervo & Vera-Toscano, 2025; See et al, 2020; Witherspoon, 2019). Typically, the experience of these teachers begins with resignation (to accept their fate); however, as illustrated in the examples given above, it evolves into a strong commitment to their students and schools. Thus, the "Accidental Missionary" concept, as described by Fabrigas and Paglinawan (2025), where location-based assignment policies unintentionally provide opportunities for profound professional development, is supported in the study.

4.3 Theme 2: The Geography of Sacrifice – Navigating the "Last Mile"

The second theme relates to the "Place" dimension of the narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and emphasizes the various physical, social, and symbolic environments in which experience occurs. Participants' accounts illustrated that "distance" in GIDA is not only quantifiable (kilometers), but can be conceptualized as the accumulation of time, effort, risk, and emotional work necessary to arrive at and remain in GIDA locations.

All of the physical barriers mentioned above—travel time, poor roads, lack of reliable transportation, exposure to extreme weather - transform the normalcy of movement into one of perseverance. Beyond the physical aspects of geography, however, distance was also experienced as social and institutional disconnection.

Inadequate access to basic services and communication infrastructure, along with limited availability of professional development and support for teachers, increased feelings of isolation, further solidifying the idea that GIDA schools are at the periphery of educational delivery. The professional ingenuity displayed by GIDA educators aligns with Castro and Bauml's (2009) conceptualization of 'adaptive resilience,' where teachers in high-need schools leverage personal agency to compensate for systemic resource deficits. Place, therefore, influenced both how participants traveled to their assigned schools and how they conceptualized themselves as professionals, resilient individuals, and teachers.

Importantly, the endurance of participants was not solely defined by hardship. Many participants reported developing strong relationships with students and the community through extended periods of engagement in a particular location, ultimately transforming distance into a sense of belonging. Therefore, "place" in GIDA represents a dynamic environment in which physical barriers, emotional attachment, and ethical responsibility converge to shape experience over time.

4.3.1 *Tyranny of Travel*

The process of getting to the station was a major event that served as an anchoring point in many teachers' stories. The teacher who described the most severe degree of difficulty with accessing her assignment site, Teacher 2, said:

"Para marating po yung mga dumagat naten na nasa gitna ng bundok malayo po talaga at nakakapagod, kelanagan po kasi tumawid ng mga ilog saka bundok, sa totoo po one day ang papunta. Oras at energy po Talaga ang byahe, kaya di po makakauwi madalas. Kaya ako po every two weeks po ako umuuwi para sulit narin po ung byahe. Siguro po ung mga kalyo at pastos ang symbol ng serbisyo ko po sa bayan." (*The trip to get to the village is a long and tiring walk, and I have to cross many rivers and mountains, and it takes me all day to make this trip. As a result of the time and energy involved in traveling, I do not go back home every day. Instead, I try to spend at least 14 days at a time in the village to maximize the time spent assisting. My blisters on my feet are my badge of service.*) — Teacher 2 (Female, 36)

Teacher 5 described a common experience of island-to-highland assignments where multiple modes of transportation were required.

"Yung pagpunta sa sitio ung susubok ng pasensya mo. Sasakay muna ng bangka mga 3-4 hours habang maalon tapos maglalakad ka naman ng 3-5 hours depende sa bilis mo. Pag may sakit or di ka maayos hind imo kakayanin magturo o tumira sag anon klase ng lugar" (*Getting to the village is a test of your patience. First, I am going to be on a boat for 3-4 hours, and I will ride those waves; once I land, I will walk uphill for 3-5 hours. If you are physically challenged, you can't live and work in this environment.*) — Teacher 5 (Male, 35)

The study's findings of the challenges of traveling for work have shown similarities to the "tyranny of travel" presented in a study by Mahinay (2021), where GIDA teachers endure long and physically difficult journeys, such as river crossings and treacherous mountain trail hikes that go well beyond an educator's job requirements. According to Mahinay, the "tyranny" of these excessive travels

is a major reason why both physical exhaustion and mental stress can occur due to the excesses of travel; however, participants in the present study indicated that they view excessive travel as a sacrifice but ultimately view it as a way to demonstrate their commitment to the community through a form of "sacrificial ritual".

4.3.2 Infrastructural and Pedagogical Poverty

Beyond traveling to remote communities, the experience of GIDA teachers is characterized by an absence of modernity. Every one of the teachers interviewed noted the absence of power, mobile phone coverage, and access to clean drinking water. Yet, it is this scarcity that has provided teachers with the means to create resourceful ways of delivering education.

"The experience of being without Google or internet connectivity is humbling, and you learn to be industrious. I utilize natural resources to deliver Math instruction (rocks, leaves, etc.), and to develop language skills, I act out lessons. Further, it is common for me to instruct an entire family unit during my home visits, not simply the student assigned to me within the ALS intervention." – Teacher 7 (Male; 45 years old)

The data provides visual evidence of the "dual burden" of GIDA teachers: they are logistics specialists and curriculum designers at the same time. Habal-Habal (motorcycle taxi) usage, along with "house-to-house" instruction, validates the finding from *Problems Encountered Among Teachers in ALS (2025)* that mobile teachers function similarly to social workers. These findings support the localized observations of Tinampay (2023), who identified that teacher distribution in the Philippines is heavily skewed by geographical 'disadvantage,' requiring a specialized psychological profile for those who stay. The "live with the community" narrative reflects a breakdown in professional barriers where the teacher is a member of the household, consuming meals and resting in similar difficult living conditions as their students.

4.4 The Anchors of Retention – Why They Stay

The central finding of this study has been the determination of "intrinsic 'pull' factors" that can consistently overcome the "extrinsic 'push' factors" that create disadvantages for service in GIDA areas. Teachers recognized both ongoing challenges (geographical remoteness, limited resources, and professional constraint) and identified two interconnected intrinsic processes that will sustain their retention - Cognitive Reframing (Perspective Shift) and Relational Assimilation.

Cognitive reframing emerged as a transformative process through which teachers redefined hardships they were experiencing into contributions they could be making. Initially, teachers saw GIDA service as temporary, burdensome, and/or as being detrimental to their careers; eventually, however, these views of GIDA service began to transform into seeing them as places of personal development, professional purpose, and moral fulfillment. Through the transformation of perspective, teachers were able to redefine what they considered a successful experience, not through conventional measures of success (i.e., convenience

and/or professional advancement), but through their measure of impact, service, and resilience.

Relational assimilation provided another means through which these processes supported each other. As teachers-maintained contact with their students, families, and communities over time, strong emotional and social bonds developed. As relationships grew stronger, teachers came to see themselves not just as outsiders who had been sent to serve in a distant rural area, but also as integral members of the community. Relational bonding/assimilation served as a significant factor contributing to teacher retention, as teachers perceived the potential relational loss when they left the area, as opposed to simply perceiving it as a loss of professional mobility.

Thus, cognitive reframing and relational assimilation act together as mutually supportive mechanisms that provide teachers with an intrinsic source of motivation to continue teaching in GIDA settings. Together, these two processes help to shape how teachers interpret challenges they face, as well as how teachers understand themselves as part of a community, thereby providing a way to understand teacher retention in GIDA settings that move beyond solely understanding retention based on either material or policy-related explanations.

4.4.1 *Perspective Shift: The Teacher as the Learner*

A major “turning point” for the two educators took place when both began to view the community’s poverty no longer as a disadvantage but rather as an opportunity to learn about contentment.

“They changed me; I didn’t want to leave them. I see life through their eyes. They are very little and are so happy. They are teaching me how to be content with what I have. When I get worried about my salary, they tell me, ‘God will give us enough for today’s bread.’ That simple spirituality gave me roots.” – Teacher 6 (Female, age 45).

4.4.2 *Assimilation and Kinship (Sociality)*

The final reason for a teacher to remain in a school is the transformation of that teacher’s status from being seen as an outsider to being viewed as an insider within that community. A teacher’s sense of ownership over the community is also a determining factor in that teacher remaining at the school.

“When I am with them, I am no longer simply a teacher. I am part of their family. I have been accepted, and I am one of them. To experience what they call eating their roots, sleeping on their floors, has been a humble experience. If I were to leave them now, I would be leaving behind my own children.” – Teacher 5 (Male, 35)

4.4.3 *The Joy of Incremental Progress*

Ultimately, job satisfaction in GIDA comes from “small wins” versus traditional standard measures.

“I feel a sense of accomplishment seeing them improve... Seeing someone who could never write their own name be able to do so for the first time is worth all the hardships of our hikes. That’s why I continue on.” – Teacher 1 (Female, 31)

This is the opposite of what most people believe, namely, that employees remain at jobs because of pay (Special Hardship Allowance) and salaries. It also illustrates Job Embeddedness Theory, specifically the "Community Links" element. According to Obida and Cagoco (2025), when educators integrate into the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) of the community, they have a "moral commitment" to remain. Additionally, this quote exemplifies the role of spirituality as a way to cope with burnout (Calimbo, 2021). This provides a psychological barrier to the burnout that can occur due to working in remote areas.

5. Discussion

The results of the narrative inquiry suggest that there is a specific developmental path of teachers working in GIDAs; far from being a singular, static decision, "remaining" is a metamorphosis of a professional.

5.1 Metadata Table

Table 1: Metadata

Theme	Audit Trail (Codes/Sub-themes)	Narrative Evidence (Raw Metadata)	Thematic Significance (The "So What")
1. The Spectrum of Arrival	Pragmatic Necessity; Divine Appointment; Last Resort	"I had no other choice. It was the only vacancy available, so I took it just to start my career." (P3)	This suggests that teacher retention is not dependent on initial passion but is more of a developed trait over time.
2. The Geography of Sacrifice	Material Lack; Ingenuity; Navigating the Last Mile	"We use our own salary to buy chalk and paper. If we don't, the kids have nothing. You become their provider." (P1)	This move shows a shift from professional duty to shared ownership that created a "psychological contract" between the teacher and the students.
3. The Anchors of Retention	Relational Assimilation; Mission-Driven Reframing	"The community has become my family. Leaving them feels like leaving my own children behind." (P5)	This proves that social integration (Relational Anchors) is a more powerful retention tool than financial incentives in GIDA areas.

The data indicate that retention in such environments is a three-stage process of professional development: The Pragmatic Entry (Arrival), The Adaptive Crucible (Navigation), and The Relational Anchoring (Retention).

5.2 Arrival: The Pragmatic Entry (External Motivation)

The beginning of the trajectory is usually pragmatic, rather than heroic. In contrast to the myth of the missionary teacher, the data reveal that the initial "arrival" is primarily driven by necessity and bureaucratic compliance. Many of the participants' GIDA assignments were required to obtain tenure, or they were assigned to GIDAs as part of the last tier of placement due to low performance in highly competitive urban districts.

This entry phase is characterized by "shock" -- a confrontation with the discrepancy between the teacher's training (usually designed for the standard classroom setting) and the realities of the rural hinterland (multi-grade, resource-poor, culturally distinct). This finding is significant because it demonstrates that the initial motivation does not determine retention. A teacher who comes to GIDAs through "no choice" is equally as likely to remain in GIDAs as a teacher who remains through "passion", if they can successfully navigate the next stage. The results corroborate with Hao and Guzman (2007) (cited in recent reviews like Bautista, 2025), who observed that while Filipino pre-service teachers often express idealistic motivations, the actual entry into the workforce is heavily influenced by the pragmatic need for tenure and economic security.

However, the findings that "initial motivation does not determine retention" add an important nuance to the self-determination theory (SDT) literature. Many studies, such as those by Saiti and Fassoulis (2011), along with meta-analyses in the field, have found that teachers entering the profession with extrinsically motivated factors (e.g., salary or tenure) have an increased likelihood of experiencing burnout compared to teachers entering the profession with intrinsically motivated factors.

The study further develops the SDT concept by providing evidence that extrinsically motivated factors can convert to intrinsic motivation over time, thus challenging the long-held dichotomy of SDT. This clearly supports Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011), where they presented that the persistence of GIDA educators can be explained through SDT, where the fulfillment of 'Relatedness' with the community offsets the 'Autonomy' loss to bureaucratic constraints.

5.3 Navigation: The Adaptive Crucible (Pedagogical & Physical Resilience)

The middle phase, "navigation", is the liminal space where the teacher either experiences burning out or develops resilience. This is the phase of extreme physical endurance and resourcefulness.

The Challenge: The physical challenges (the long walks, river crossings, etc.) serve as a physical filter for the teachers; the narratives indicate that physical endurance is merely a minimum threshold.

The Adaptation: The real challenge of navigation is pedagogical. The teachers transition from complaining about the lack of materials (deficit thinking) to creating materials using the environment (asset-based thinking). They develop the ability to communicate in the local language(s), understand the cultural norms of their students (IP Customs), and adapt the ALS Curriculum to fit the "harvest season" of their students.

This phase transitions the teacher from a visitor to a survivor. It is during this phase that the teacher develops a sense of professional identity in the context of scarcity. A move toward "asset-based thinking" rather than "deficit thinking" is consistent with Tumolva et al. (2025), who conducted a phenomenological study called "Surviving in the Trails," where they reported that while many GIDA

teachers suffer an initial shock as a result of entering the profession, they eventually begin to use "culture-based teaching" approaches that utilize indigenous resources as substitutes for the often-absent standard resource options; Abdon (2025) also pointed out that all successful GIDA teachers establish dual roles as both professionals and members of the community in which they live, which allows them to blur the distinction between their job and the necessity of survival, and to create new forms of pedagogy that will be driven by the limitations of the resources available. However, the study defines resilience as a reframing process; both Bautista (2022) and Embong et al. (2025) have pointed out that there is a "romanticizing of resilience". This has resulted from their studies on the teacher workload in the Philippines. The studies show how what appears to be "re-framing" (e.g., "the simple life") may in fact be a sign of learned helplessness due to system failure.

5.4 Retention: The Relational Anchoring (Internal Integration)

The final phase, "retention", occurs when the teacher's motivation for remaining shifts from duty to connection. The decision to remain is no longer based on the job description, but upon the social connections made. The primacy of relational anchors in this study corroborates Reininger (2012), whose research suggests that teachers with strong local ties and community 'embeddedness' are significantly more likely to persist in geographically isolated assignments. The relational anchoring represents sociality (relational depth). The teachers express a deep emotional and spiritual "debt" to the community. They feel accountable for the future trajectories of their IP Students.

The Integration: By this point, the teacher has often become an adopted member of the community – eating their food, sleeping in their homes, and participating in their ceremonies. The boundaries between the roles of "teacher" and "community member" are blurred.

Retention is maintained through Job Embeddedness – the "links" and "fit" of the community are so strong that leaving would be emotionally painful for the teacher, even though the physical hardships of the location would still exist. Findings by Nguyen et al (2020) and Anog et al. (2024) argue that community links are often stronger predictors of retention in rural areas than salary. In addition, Obida and Cagoco (2025) support this by citing that teachers in IP communities often develop "utang na loob" (debt of gratitude) to the tribe that hosts them, which creates a psychological contract that makes leaving emotionally difficult.

5.5 The Central Mechanism: The Perceptual Shift (Cognitive Reframing)

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is the mechanism that enables the trajectory of the teacher. As mentioned in the Conclusion:

"The teachers remained not because the conditions improved, but because their perception of the conditions improved." This phenomenon may be theoretically understood as Cognitive Reframing within a Salutogenic Framework.

From Deficit to Sufficiency: Initially, the GIDA environment is defined by what is absent (electricity, water, internet, etc.). Ultimately, "stayers" begin to define the

environment by what is present (peace, trust from the community, spiritual simplicity, eager students). The poverty of the physical infrastructure is reframed as "simple living".

The Mirror Effect (Reciprocal Resilience): The teachers do not simply "take" education to the community; the community "gives" to the teachers. The stories reveal that as the teachers see the resilience of the Indigenous Peoples, who live with so much less, they are shamed out of their complaints and inspired by a sense of gratitude. The teacher remains because the community's resilience functions as a mirror, reflecting on the teacher a more contented version of him/herself.

Spiritual Coping: The phrase "God will provide" is not simply a religious platitude, but a psychological coping mechanism. It allows the teacher to let go of the things they cannot control (the infrastructure, delayed salaries) and to focus on the direct, tangible impact they can have on a student's life.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that GIDA retention is a process of assimilation of the periphery. The story is about how an outsider becomes an insider and finds that while the "last mile" is physically demanding, it is spiritually and professionally rejuvenating.

6. Implications of the Study

This narrative inquiry identifies several theoretical and practical implications regarding the concept of teacher retention in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), based upon the researcher's shift of focus from why teachers do not remain (attrition) to why teachers do remain (retention).

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The study adds to the body of research related to teacher psychology and job embeddedness, as it suggests that retention within an environment such as a GIDA is a transformational process (as opposed to being a static decision).

6.2 Retaining Teachers in Extreme Environments as Metamorphosis vs Decision

Traditional retention theory has generally viewed retention in terms of job satisfaction. The current study supports the notion that in areas that have both material lack and relational need (the context of GIDAs), retention occurs due to cognitive reframing. In other words, teachers find sufficient relational support to make up for the lack of material resources. Therefore, teacher motivational theories will require consideration of the role of cultural assimilation and spirituality in transforming extrinsic factors into intrinsic motivators.

6.3 Transition of Motivation Types:

The results of the study provide a theoretical link between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. While the pragmatic arrival (motivated by tenured status or pay) may be a typical means by which new teachers enter the profession, it does not necessarily equate to a prediction of long-term retention. Rather, it appears that extrinsic motivators (e.g., monetary rewards) become transformed into deeply ingrained internalized commitments via extended exposure to local communities,

such as what was observed in the veteran teachers who participated in the current study.

6.4 Practical Implications

The experiences of the veteran teachers participating in the current study provided avenues of action for educational leaders and policymakers:

Change in Support Mechanisms: While the current study found that financial support mechanisms (i.e., special hardship allowance) were required for long-term retention of rural teachers, the researchers also determined that these mechanisms alone were insufficient. Thus, educational organizations/leaderships must develop alternative forms of support that are non-monetary, such as mental health services available exclusively to rural teachers, peer mentoring circles, etc., as well as developing methods to reduce the stress burden experienced by rural teachers by providing pax-loading/administrative relief.

Recruitment and Training Strategies: To alleviate "arrival shock" experienced by beginning rural teachers, TEI's, and the DOE must create "grow your own" (GYO) recruitment strategies that target indigenous peoples' youth. Additionally, pre-service education institutions should create modules in their teacher education curriculum focused on teaching students how to use the limited resources available in rural locations (e.g., using nature as a tool for teaching science) in lieu of utilizing technology.

Teacher Wellness Policy: The findings from this research imply that the DOE must develop a wellness/cultural immersion sabbatical program for rural teachers who have served for over five years. These sabbaticals would allow rural teachers time to recharge while allowing their accumulated knowledge/skill to set to be documented and transferred to new rural teachers.

7. Conclusion

Teachers' retention in areas that are geographically isolated and disadvantaged has been characterized as a static state of being a "stayer", rather than a dynamic process of transformation of professional identity. The participants' stories demonstrate how teachers who transition from an "outsider," often for practical reasons, to a resilient "stayer" experience a distinct three-stage progression: Pragmatic Arrival, Adaptive Navigation, and Relational Anchoring.

Most importantly, this research shows that there is a disconnect between whether or not a teacher remains in the "last mile" with either the physical condition of the location or the quality of the financial incentives, such as the Special Hardship Allowance (SHA). Rather, retention is based on a deep paradigmatic shift (Cognitive Reframing) in which the teachers who remain redefine the GIDA environment, transforming it from a place of "deficit and lack" to a place of "relational sufficiency and purpose". These educators have transformed themselves into members of the Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities and the Alternative Learning System (ALS), thus finding that the same difficulties they

experienced as "shocks" eventually became the foundation upon which their personal fulfillment as educators was grounded. Therefore, the "staying power" of the educators in this research is a demonstration of the reciprocal relationship of resiliency: the educator does not solely teach the community; the community provides the educator with a feeling of belonging and spiritual contentment that allows the educator to continue.

8. Recommendation

Several recommendations can be made based upon these results for both educational stakeholders and the research community. Specifically, DepEd and policymakers will have to establish holistic support systems that provide educator support through additional mechanisms beyond solely monetary incentives, such as the Special Hardship Allowance. Some examples of practical implementation may include providing non-monetary forms of support (such as structured peer mentoring or mental health retreats for GIDA educators) and a paradigm shift towards locally based recruitment strategies that emphasize recruiting teachers who are indigenous peoples.

The research community is encouraged to build upon this research by expanding the scope of this type of inquiry using longitudinal designs that would allow them to longitudinally follow educators from their "pragmatic arrival" through their first five years of service to better understand how educators develop/evolve in terms of resilience over time. In addition, comparative narrative designs across geographic areas (e.g., Luzon and Mindanao) could be used to identify how different cultural/physical environments affect the "anchors of retention" identified in this study.

9. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study. This research was conducted independently, and the authors have no financial, personal, or professional relationships with any organization or entity that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings, analysis, or interpretations presented in this paper.

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