

Stories of Hope: Teachers' Narratives of Commitment in Remote Upland Schools

Beverly I. Villegas, Genevie I. Villegas, Jemuel I. Villegas, Rezy V. Mendaño*, Joy B. Araza

Graduate School, Samar State University Catbalogan City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Teaching in remote upland schools involves persistent challenges such as geographical isolation, limited resources, and restricted access; however, many teachers continue to demonstrate sustained commitment. This qualitative narrative inquiry examined how teachers in remote upland schools in the Catbalogan City Division construct commitment, cope with challenges, and sustain hope and professional fulfillment. Thirteen public elementary school teachers participated in in-depth interviews, and data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Findings identified four interrelated themes: teaching as a calling grounded in service and moral responsibility, learners as emotional and moral anchors of commitment, hardship and isolation as normalized conditions, and coping through faith, positivity, creativity, and community support. Hope was derived from incremental learner progress, while professional fulfillment was associated with personal and professional identity development characterized by resilience, confidence, and purpose. The study concludes that teachers' commitment and hope in remote upland schools are relational, moral, and identity-driven rather than dependent solely on material conditions, highlighting the need for educational support systems that address both structural and psycho-social dimensions of teaching in geographically isolated and disadvantaged contexts.

Keywords: Commitment; Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA); Hope; Narrative Inquiry; Teacher Identity

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in remote upland schools often demands a level of dedication that transcends ordinary professional duty. Teachers assigned to these contexts routinely face multiple challenges, including walking long distances through steep terrain, coping with limited instructional materials, working with inadequate infrastructure, and experiencing professional and social isolation. Despite these conditions, many teachers remain steadfast in their service, motivated by hope, compassion, and a deep sense of vocation. Their stories reflect personal sacrifice alongside a persistent belief in the transformative power of education.

Within the Philippine educational system, the Department of Education (DepEd) identifies Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs) as priority zones for intervention due to their limited access to quality education and basic social services (DepEd, 2020). Teachers assigned to upland and remote schools such as those in the Catbalogan City Division exemplify these challenges. Located in mountainous barangays with limited accessibility, infrastructure, and technological connectivity, these schools demand extraordinary effort from teachers. Yet, educators continue to persevere, driven by a strong sense of moral duty and commitment to serving learners in marginalized communities.

International scholarship provides important insights into teachers' commitment in rural contexts. Clarke and McKenzie (2019) described rural teachers as embodying moral purpose and adaptability, often developing strong community ties that reinforce their professional identity. Similarly, Nguyen and Tesar (2024) emphasized that teachers' commitment and sense of purpose are constructed through ongoing interactions between personal experiences, community contexts, and broader societal expectations, highlighting the relational and narrative nature of professional identity. Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, and Kline (2018) further argued that rural settings create a minimal space in which teachers continuously negotiate their professional roles and sense of self, with place and community playing a central role in shaping commitment. These perspectives align with Day and Gu's (2014)

assertion that teachers' sustained commitment is rooted in moral purpose and relational care, particularly in challenging environments.

Local studies in the Philippine context echo these international findings. Teachers in rural and disadvantaged settings face persistent systemic challenges, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and professional isolation (Barrientos et al., 2025). Despite these constraints, educators demonstrate remarkable resilience and dedication, often personally investing in learners' needs, such as purchasing school supplies using their own salaries to ensure continuity of learning (Quejada & Orale, 2018). Teachers' motivation in these contexts is largely intrinsic, anchored in a strong sense of professional calling, community engagement, and deep empathy for learners from marginalized backgrounds (Salazar & Plaza, 2025). Rather than external rewards, personal fulfillment and service drive teachers' commitment, reflecting a profound dedication to educational equity and social responsibility.

However, there remains limited qualitative research that foregrounds teachers' lived narratives, particularly in upland schools within the Philippine context. Much of the existing literature focuses on conditions, satisfaction, or burnout, with fewer studies examining how teachers construct meaning, hope, and professional identity through lived experience.

This study addresses this gap by employing narrative inquiry to explore how teachers in upland schools interpret their experiences, sustain commitment, and construct hope. By centering teachers' voices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of teaching in marginalized contexts and provides insights for developing more responsive educational support systems.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes related to commitment, hope, and professional fulfillment. Narrative inquiry was appropriate as it prioritizes participants' stories as sources of knowledge and enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences over time.

Research Environment

The study was conducted in remote upland public elementary schools under the Department of Education (DepEd), Catbalogan City Division, Province of Samar, Philippines. These schools are situated in mountainous barangays, where access often requires several hours of walking through steep and rugged terrain, particularly during adverse weather conditions.

The research environment is characterized by limited infrastructure, unreliable transportation, lack of internet connectivity, and scarcity of instructional materials. Teachers assigned to these schools often experience professional isolation and minimal access to institutional support services. These contextual conditions provided a rich setting for exploring narratives of commitment, resilience, hope, and professional identity.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study consisted of public elementary school teachers assigned to remote upland schools in the Catbalogan City Division. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure the inclusion of teachers with direct and sustained experience teaching in upland schools. Eligible participants were those who were currently teaching or had previously taught in an upland school for at least one academic year, were willing to share their personal teaching experiences through in-depth interviews, and provided informed consent to participate in the study.

The participants varied in terms of age, length of service, and teaching experience, allowing for a wide range of perspectives while maintaining contextual relevance. Data saturation was achieved at the thirteenth interview, as no new themes or substantive insights emerged from subsequent narratives. Thus, 13 participants were

considered as participants of the study. This indicated that the sample size was sufficient to capture the depth and breadth of teachers' experiences necessary to address the research objectives within the narrative inquiry framework.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich narratives about teachers' motivations, challenges, coping strategies, sources of hope, and professional fulfillment.

The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, while ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. Probing questions were used to clarify responses and encourage deeper reflection, particularly on moments of challenge, success, and personal transformation.

Validation of the Research Instrument

The interview guide underwent content validation by a panel of experts with backgrounds in education, qualitative research, and teacher development. Validators reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, alignment with research objectives, and ethical appropriateness.

Revisions were made based on validators' suggestions, including rephrasing ambiguous questions, improving sequencing, and ensuring that questions encouraged narrative responses rather than short factual answers. The validated instrument was deemed highly acceptable for data collection.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through individual in-depth interviews with the teacher-participants. Prior to the interviews, permission was secured from appropriate school authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Interviews were conducted in locations convenient and comfortable for the participants, either within school premises or other agreed-upon settings. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in thirteen (13) complete Teacher-Participants' transcripts that served as the primary data source for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Patterns were identified across narratives and organized into themes aligned with the research objectives.

To enhance analytical rigor, interpretations were continuously compared with existing literature. While ChatGPT (version 5.1) was used as an auxiliary tool to assist in organizing codes and refining descriptions, all analytical decisions remained under the researcher's control, ensuring reflexivity and methodological integrity.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning codes (Teacher-Participant 01–13) instead of using real names.

All audio recordings and Teacher-Participants were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. The study complied with ethical guidelines for qualitative research and respected the dignity, privacy, and well-being of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings organized according to the study's research objectives and emerging themes. Teachers' narratives are presented through vignettes and analyzed to illuminate how commitment, coping, hope, and professional fulfillment are constructed in the lived realities of remote upland teaching.

Foundations of Teacher's Commitment in Remote Upland Schools

Theme 1: Teaching as a Calling Anchored in Service and Responsibility

Teachers' narratives consistently framed teaching in remote upland schools as a calling grounded in service and moral responsibility rather than as a purely occupational role. Commitment was shaped by personal values, life experiences, and a belief in education as a form of social contribution. Teachers described their decision to accept and remain in upland assignments as intentional and value-driven, enabling persistence despite challenging working conditions.

Vignettes:

Service and purpose emerged as central to teachers' commitment:

"I accepted this assignment because I wanted to serve learners who have limited access to education." (Teacher-Participant 05)

For some, upland teaching fulfilled long-held professional aspirations:

"This is my dream to be a DepEd teacher, so I accepted the assignment despite the challenges." (Teacher-Participant 04)

Others described teaching as integral to their identity:

"Teaching here is not just a job; it is my purpose." (Teacher-Participant 09)

Learners served as a moral anchor, sustaining teachers' decisions to stay:

"I value patience, humility, and service. Being new, I remind myself that I am here to learn as much as I am here to teach. I also believe that every child, no matter how remote their community is, deserves quality education." (Teacher-Participant 03)

These accounts illustrate how teachers construct upland teaching as an expression of service, commitment, and professional identity. Analysis indicates that teachers' commitment in upland schools is primarily sustained by intrinsic motivation rooted in values such as service, responsibility, and compassion. Rather than being shaped by external rewards or institutional incentives, teaching is constructed as morally meaningful work in which hardship is interpreted as purposeful rather than discouraging. Commitment, therefore, emerges as an active and sustained choice rather than passive endurance.

These findings align with studies emphasizing that teachers' professional commitment is rooted in moral purpose and service-oriented identity, particularly in challenging contexts (Flores, 2018; Ayinselya, 2020). Within the Philippine context, Maloloy-on and Apas (2025) similarly documented exceptional dedication among teachers in upland and GIDA schools, who describe their work as a mission rather than mere employment. The present study extends this literature by demonstrating how personal values and lived experiences converge to sustain commitment in resource-constrained environments.

However, while the findings highlight strong commitment, they should be interpreted alongside studies that report burnout, stress, and attrition among teachers in disadvantaged contexts. Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2016) demonstrated that teachers sustain their professional engagement through ongoing meaning-making processes that help them navigate challenges and vulnerability. Similarly, Shirley et al. (2020) found that educator well-being improves when school environments enable teachers to accomplish morally meaningful

purposes. These perspectives suggest that commitment is not uniform but dynamically shaped by individual coping capacities, contextual support, and opportunities to sustain meaningful work. It is possible that participants in this study represent those who have successfully adapted, while those who experienced greater difficulty may no longer remain in upland assignments.

Theme 2: Learners as the Emotional and Moral Anchor of Commitment

Teachers' narratives indicate that sustained commitment to teaching in remote upland schools is deeply anchored in their relationships with learners. While personal values and motivations shape teachers' initial acceptance of upland assignments, it is learners' continued presence, eagerness to learn, and observable progress that reaffirm teachers' decision to remain. Commitment thus emerges as a relational and moral practice, continuously renewed through everyday teaching encounters rather than fixed at the point of assignment.

Vignettes:

Teachers consistently positioned learners as the central reason for persevering in challenging teaching conditions:

"Seeing my learners eager to learn makes me stay." (Teacher-Participant 06)

"Someone is waiting for me to teach, that is why I continue." (Teacher-Participant 02)

"Their smiles and progress make all the sacrifices worth it." (Teacher-Participant 10)

"When I see them learning, I forget how tired I am." (Teacher-Participant 11)

These accounts illustrate how learners function as emotional reference points that give meaning to teachers' endurance and sacrifice. Analysis suggests that learner engagement and progress play a central role in sustaining teachers' commitment, reinforcing their sense of purpose and emotional fulfillment. Rather than being driven solely by internal motivation, commitment is co-constructed through relational interactions with learners, where everyday classroom experiences serve as sources of validation and renewal.

These findings align with Isip et al. (2023) that teachers in challenging educational environments demonstrate strong dedication rooted in learners' potential, despite constraints such as limited resources and difficult travel conditions. Similarly, Quejada and Orale (2018) found that learners' enthusiasm and academic progress provide emotional fulfillment that reinforces teachers' resolve to remain in remote schools.

The present study extends this body of evidence by demonstrating that learners are not merely recipients of instruction but serve as moral anchors within teachers' narratives. Commitment is thus transformed into an ethical and relational practice, sustained through care, responsibility, and ongoing engagement with learners' needs and aspirations. However, this learner-centered commitment may also contribute to emotional strain, as teachers become deeply invested in their students' well-being despite limited resources and structural support. As suggested by Shu (2022), strong moral purpose and relational commitment can both sustain and challenge teacher well-being, particularly in demanding contexts. This implies that while learners strengthen teachers' commitment, they may also intensify emotional demands, highlighting the need for supportive conditions that balance care with professional sustainability.

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Remote Upland Teaching

Theme 1: Hardship and Isolation as Normalized Realities of Teaching Life

Teachers' narratives portray hardship and isolation as ordinary and expected conditions of teaching in remote upland schools. Rather than framing these circumstances as exceptional barriers, participants described them as integral to their everyday teaching reality. Long hours of walking across rugged terrain, exposure to unsafe travel conditions, limited transportation and connectivity, scarcity of instructional materials, and experiences of social isolation were consistently narrated as routine aspects of their work. Over time, these conditions became normalized, shaping how teachers understood their roles, responsibilities, and persistence in upland contexts.

Vignettes:

“The road is very dangerous especially during rainy days.” (Teacher-Participant 12)

“Most challenging is the hiking part, there are days raining, the sun was intense heating our skin heartbeat skip a seconds and many more. No internet/network, signal, transportation is so hard road is so scary. Food, water are so limited and even the school materials.” (Teacher-Participant 02)

“Working in an upland school comes with several challenges that require patience and adaptability. Transportation is often difficult because the school is far from town, and bad weather can make the journey even harder. Teaching materials are limited, so I have to be resourceful in making lessons engaging and understandable for my students. Some learners struggle with attendance due to household chores. Living in a remote area can also feel isolating at times, but these challenges encourage me to work harder, find creative solutions, and stay committed to helping my students learn and grow.” (Teacher-Participant 09)

These accounts illustrate how hardship and isolation are embedded in teachers’ daily narratives of work, survival, and professional responsibility in upland schools.

Analysis indicates that such conditions are not merely endured but gradually integrated into teachers’ professional outlook, becoming part of what it means to teach in these contexts. In geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, challenges such as prolonged travel, limited resources, and constrained institutional support are commonly reported, reinforcing the structural nature of these conditions (De Fiesta & Postrano, 2025; Isip et al., 2023; Baynosa et al., 2024). Within this context, teachers appear to reinterpret hardship as an inherent dimension of their role, rather than as a temporary obstacle.

This normalization suggests that resilience operates not only as a response to difficulty but as an ongoing process of meaning-making through which teachers align their experiences with their professional identity. However, while such normalization may sustain persistence, it may also obscure the structural challenges that shape teachers’ working conditions, potentially limiting critical engagement with the need for systemic support. Thus, hardship becomes both a source of resilience and a condition that warrants continued attention within educational policy and practice.

Theme 2: Coping and Adaptation through Faith, Positivity, and Community Support

Teachers’ narratives indicate that coping and adaptation in remote upland schools are sustained primarily through internal beliefs and relational support systems rather than formal institutional mechanisms. In response to persistent hardship, teachers drew strength from faith, maintained a positive outlook, exercised creativity in teaching, and relied on collegial and community support. Coping was not described as a temporary reaction to stress but as an ongoing process of meaning-making that enabled teachers to adapt and persist in challenging contexts.

Vignettes:

Teachers frequently emphasized faith and reflection as sources of emotional strength:

“I prayed and reflected on my purpose whenever I felt tired.”(Teacher-Participant 01)

Resourcefulness emerged as a key adaptive strategy in addressing material constraints:

“If there are no materials, I improvise or buy what I can.”(Teacher-Participant 11)

Support from colleagues and the community played a critical role in sustaining motivation:

“My colleagues and the community help and encourage me.”(Teacher-Participant 05)

Teachers also described reframing hardship through purpose and determination:

“I cope with these challenges by focusing on my purpose as a teacher... I remembered my students who wake up early just to attend school, so I continued the hike and arrived safely.”(Teacher-Participant 12)

Maintaining optimism was repeatedly identified as essential for perseverance:

“Positive thinking keeps me going.”(Teacher-Participant 06)

These responses illustrate how teachers mobilize personal beliefs and social relationships to cope with the demands of upland teaching.

Analysis suggests that coping strategies are rooted in internal resources and relational networks that enable teachers to sustain motivation despite limited institutional support. Traits such as optimism, faith, and adaptability have been associated with teacher resilience in challenging environments, where personal and social resources function as key protective factors (Cloma et al., 2025; Ebersöhn, 2014). In this context, coping is not merely reactive but becomes an integral part of teachers’ professional practice, shaping how they interpret and respond to adversity.

The findings further indicate that coping strategies are embedded in teachers’ sense of identity and purpose. By reframing hardship through faith, positivity, and relational support, teachers transform adversity into a meaningful aspect of their professional journey. Coping and adaptation thus emerge as dynamic processes that sustain both commitment and resilience in remote upland schools. At the same time, reliance on personal and relational coping mechanisms may reflect gaps in institutional support, where teachers are compelled to depend on individual resilience to navigate structural challenges. While such strategies enable persistence, they may also place additional emotional and professional demands on teachers, highlighting the importance of strengthening systemic support alongside individual coping capacities.

Hope and Professional Fulfillment in Upland Teaching

Theme 1: Hope Constructed Through Small but Meaningful Successes

This theme indicates that hope in remote upland schools is grounded in small, everyday teaching successes, particularly in learners’ academic and personal progress. Rather than being abstract or future-oriented, hope is experienced through concrete moments such as learners learning to read, demonstrating improvement, and completing the school year despite adversity. These incremental achievements reaffirm the value of teachers’ efforts and sustain their motivation and sense of professional fulfillment in challenging contexts.

Vignettes:

“When I first started teaching here, only a few of my pupils could read. After several months, I saw improvement. I felt happy because I knew that, little by little, I was able to help them.”(Teacher-Participant 11)

“One of my most fulfilling moments was when my struggling learners finally read simple words on their own. Seeing their smiles made all the effort worth it.” (Teacher-Participant 12)

“Even if only one learner understands the lesson or improves, that already gives me hope to continue.” (Teacher-Participant 07)

“Despite the long walks and lack of materials, we finished the school year. Seeing my pupils move to the next grade made me feel that everything we went through had meaning.”(Teacher-Participant 09)

These accounts illustrate how hope is constructed through immediate and observable learner progress rather than distant or systemic outcomes.

Analysis suggests that teachers’ sense of hope emerges from everyday classroom experiences, where incremental learner achievements function as sources of emotional validation and reinforce the perceived significance of their work. In this context, hope is closely tied to proximity, sustained through direct engagement with learners’

progress rather than dependent on long-term institutional change. Such patterns have been observed in rural education settings, where teachers maintain hope by recognizing small but meaningful gains in learners' development despite persistent adversity (Coetzee et al., 2017).

The findings further indicate that hope operates as a sustaining force that enables teachers to navigate physical exhaustion, emotional strain, and material limitations while maintaining commitment to their role. By locating meaning in incremental successes, teachers are able to reinterpret challenging conditions as purposeful and worthwhile. At the same time, reliance on small successes as sources of hope may reflect the absence of broader structural improvements, where teachers draw motivation from immediate outcomes in the face of limited systemic support. While such experiences sustain engagement, they also highlight the need for institutional conditions that reinforce, rather than substitute for, teachers' efforts to maintain hope in challenging educational environments.

Theme 2: Transformation of Professional and Personal Identity

Teachers' narratives indicate that fulfillment in upland teaching extends beyond learners' success to include profound personal and professional transformation. Sustained engagement in challenging contexts reshaped how teachers understood themselves, their roles, and the meaning of teaching, leading to the development of a more grounded, resilient, and purpose-driven identity.

Vignettes:

Several participants reflected on how upland teaching transformed their confidence and professional self-concept:

"Before, I was unsure and afraid of the challenges. I doubted if I could survive teaching here. Now, I see myself as stronger and more confident. Teaching here changed how I see myself as a teacher."(Teacher-Participant 03)

Others emphasized growth in patience, adaptability, and emotional resilience:

"Teaching in this school taught me patience. I learned how to adjust to situations, how to understand my learners better, and how to keep going even when everything feels difficult."(Teacher-Participant 13)

Fulfillment was closely linked to a redefined sense of purpose and expanded professional identity:

"I no longer see teaching as just work or a source of income. I now see myself as a guide and mentor who gives hope to children in this community."(Teacher-Participant 01)

Some teachers described upland teaching as a life-changing experience that reshaped their values and priorities:

"This experience transformed me. It changed my mindset, my priorities, and my purpose as a teacher. I became more committed, not only to teaching, but to serving."(Teacher-Participant 10)

These utterances illustrate how prolonged engagement in upland teaching contexts fosters both personal growth and professional reorientation.

Analysis suggests that identity transformation emerges through continuous reflection and meaning-making in response to sustained exposure to hardship and responsibility. Rather than merely adapting to challenging conditions, teachers internalize these experiences as formative, resulting in increased confidence, resilience, and a strengthened sense of purpose. Fulfillment, therefore, is derived not only from learner outcomes but also from the evolving understanding of oneself as an educator. Such patterns are consistent with research indicating that teacher resilience is closely linked to the development of professional identity, where personal beliefs, values, and contextual experiences interact to sustain engagement in the profession (Samsudin et al., 2025). Within this perspective, identity is continuously reconstructed through lived experience, particularly in demanding educational environments.

While this transformation strengthens resilience, it may also involve emotional and professional strain, as teachers continually negotiate expectations, responsibilities, and personal well-being in resource-constrained settings. This highlights the importance of institutional conditions that support teachers not only as practitioners but as developing professionals navigating complex roles.

Overall, the findings show that teachers' experiences in remote upland schools are shaped by the interaction of moral commitment, relational engagement, adaptive coping, and identity transformation. Commitment is not static but continuously reinforced through meaningful interactions with learners, while challenges are addressed through internal resources and community support. Hope is sustained through incremental classroom successes, and fulfillment develops through ongoing personal and professional growth. These patterns suggest that teaching in upland contexts involves continuous meaning-making, where adversity is interpreted as purposeful. This also highlights the importance of strengthening institutional support systems to sustain teachers' well-being and long-term engagement in geographically isolated and disadvantaged settings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how teachers in remote upland schools construct commitment, cope with adversity, and sustain hope and professional fulfillment. The findings show that commitment is grounded in moral purpose, reinforced through relationships with learners, and shaped by sustained exposure to challenging working conditions. Despite constraints such as geographical isolation and limited resources, teachers maintain engagement through intrinsic motivation, faith, community support, and everyday meaning-making practices. Hope is derived from incremental learner progress, while fulfillment is linked to ongoing personal and professional identity development.

These findings suggest that teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas should be understood not only as implementers of policy but as professionals whose practice is shaped by relational and identity-based processes. Support systems should therefore extend beyond material provision to include structured mentorship, reflective professional development, and community-based support that address both emotional and professional needs.

Future research may adopt longitudinal and multi-contextual approaches to examine how teacher commitment and identity evolve over time. Incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational practice in remote and marginalized settings.

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