



## **WALKING THE LONG ROAD TO EDUCATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES AMONG LEARNERS IN FAR-FLUNG COMMUNITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Access to education in far-flung Philippine communities, such as those served by Salawagan National High School in Quezon, Bukidnon, is hindered by geographical isolation, where junior high students endure long, perilous commutes on unpaved roads, landslide-prone slopes, and flood-swollen rivers, often leading to tardiness, fatigue, and dropout risks. Despite Department of Education initiatives, students' lived experiences remain under explored amid poverty and infrastructural deficits. This phenomenological study fills a role by centering 15 junior high students' narratives from Salawagan National High School, a public school serving learners from remote, far-flung communities with limited transport and weather-disrupted routes, addressing gaps in local research focused on facilities or teachers rather than learners' agency and resilience. The objective was to explore their experiences studying far from school, guided by questions on daily realities, distance-related difficulties, coping strategies, and peer recommendations. Employing purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke), with member checking ensuring trustworthiness. Findings yielded four themes: (1) "risky journeys" involving muddy paths and breakdowns; (2) "strain" from lateness, supply access issues, and depression; (3) "endurance for family dreams"; and (4) advice like early rising, faith, and persistence. These insights reveal distance as both barrier and motivator, informing Department of Education policies on transport subsidies, flexible scheduling, and psycho-social aid to enhance Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) retention at schools like Salawagan National High School. Future research should pursue multi-region comparisons and gender analysis.

**Keywords:** *far-flung communities, Salawagan NHS, lived experiences, distance barriers, student resilience, phenomenological study*

## INTRODUCTION

Access to basic education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) remains a persistent challenge despite policy commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education. In many far-flung Philippine communities like Quezon, Bukidnon, students at Salawagan National High School must travel long distances on unsafe, unpaved roads, cross rivers and landslide-prone slopes, and shoulder high transportation costs to attend school, which affects attendance, punctuality, and learning engagement. These structural barriers intersect with poverty, or even limited communication infrastructure, further constraining students' capacity to participate fully in schooling.

Recent Philippine studies have begun to document the schooling conditions, but many focus on facilities and teachers rather than on students' own lived experiences. A 2024 qualitative study on a far-flung National High School in Davao Occidental highlighted inadequate classrooms, lack of electricity, multi-grade teaching, and difficult access roads as central constraints in the learning environment (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024). Similarly, research on far-flung Integrated Schools in Sarangani Province underscored infrastructure gaps, dangerous travel routes, and resource shortages as key challenges for teachers and learners (Gumapac, 2025). DepEd Region I's study on "Schoolless Barangays" also revealed that learners living beyond the recommended catchment radius have higher absences and are more likely to drop out due to transport costs and distance (DepEd Region I, 2022). Local exploratory work on students from far-flung barangays likewise reports long walking times, frequent tardiness, and difficulty buying school materials due to distance from town centers.

International research confirms that distance to school and poor transport infrastructure are major determinants of educational participation and learning outcomes in rural settings. Studies in low- and middle-income countries consistently link long travel time, unsafe routes, and high transport costs with absenteeism, dropout, and lower academic performance (Garnham et al., 2020; Mrema & Iddi, 2021). In rural New Zealand, adolescents reported that limited public transport options compelled them to choose between long walks, cycling, or being driven, with built environment and safety perceptions strongly shaping their mode choice and willingness to walk or cycle to school (Calverley et al., 2020). Other international literature after 2019 similarly emphasizes that distance and mobility constraints intersect with poverty and gender, often reinforcing educational disadvantage among rural youth (Ako-Arrey et al., 2021; Soko & Chikoko, 2022).

However, several gaps remain in the literature. First, most Philippine studies on far-flung communities focus on teachers' experiences, school facilities, or distance learning modalities, with fewer phenomenological accounts centered on junior high school students' own narratives about distance-related hardships. Second, while DepEd reports

quantify access issues in schoolless barangays, they provide limited qualitative insight into how distance shapes students' daily routines, emotions, coping strategies, and aspirations. Third, international studies often examine active travel or transport policy but less frequently explore how students reinterpret distance—whether as a barrier, a formative hardship, or a motivation to persist—within their socio-cultural and family contexts. This leaves a conceptual gap regarding resilience, agency, and meaning-making among students who “walk the long road” to education.

Addressing these gaps is important for aligning access-focused policies with the lived realities of learners in GIDAs. In the Philippine context, interventions such as establishing more schools, improving roads, or providing transport subsidies require grounded understanding of how students experience and manage distance on a day-to-day basis. By foregrounding their voices, schools and local governments can design more responsive support mechanisms, including scheduling adjustments, flexible assessment, psycho- social support, and community-based transport arrangements. This study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students in far-flung communities as they pursue their education despite geographical and infrastructural barriers. This study centers voices from Salawagan National High School to bridge this gap.

## **Research Questions**

This study explored the lived experiences of 15 Salawagan NHS junior high students from remote sitios and barangays, investigating daily realities, distance-induced difficulties, coping strategies, and peer recommendations through semi-structured interviews conducted in March 2026. this study sought to address the following questions:

1. What is it like studying in a far-flung place from the perspective of junior high school students?
2. What difficulties do they face because of distance?
3. How do they cope with or manage these difficulties in their studies?
4. What recommendations do they offer to fellow students in similar situations?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students of Salawagan National High School residing in far-flung communities. Phenomenology is appropriate when the goal is to understand how individuals make sense of a shared phenomenon—in this case, studying while living far from school—by describing the essence of their experiences from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Recent Philippine studies on far-flung schools and GIDAs have similarly used phenomenology to capture nuanced experiences of teachers and learners in remote areas (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024;

Gumapac, 2025). International qualitative works on school travel and rural education also demonstrate the value of phenomenological and interpretive approaches in highlighting adolescents' perceptions of distance, safety, and mobility (Calverley et al., 2020; Ako-Arrey et al., 2021).

## **Research Locale and Participants**

The study was conducted at Salawagan National High School, a public junior high school in Barangay Salawagan, Quezon, Bukidnon (Region X, Northern Mindanao), serving students from far-flung, remote sitios and some barangays who endure extended walks or motorcycle rides over unpaved roads, flood-prone rivers, and weather-affected routes.

This context reflects typical conditions of geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas identified by DepEd, where distance and poor infrastructure negatively affect access and completion rates (DepEd Region I, 2022).

Fifteen junior high school students from Salawagan National High School participated in the study, all of whom live significantly far from the school and regularly experience distance-related challenges. Similar sample sizes are common in Philippine phenomenological studies involving students and teachers in far-flung or rural settings, which prioritize depth and richness of narratives over large numbers (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Gumapac, 2025). International phenomenological and qualitative research on rural students' travel to school also typically engages small, purposively selected groups to yield detailed accounts of daily experiences (Calverley et al., 2020; Ako-Arrey et al., 2021).

## **Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria were: (a) currently enrolled as junior high school students in the selected school, (b) residing in far-flung communities requiring substantial travel time or difficult routes to reach school, and (c) willing to share their experiences. This approach aligns with local qualitative studies on learners and teachers in far-flung and GIDA contexts, which intentionally recruit participants experiencing the specific challenges of distance, isolation, or limited access (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Gumapac, 2025). International literature on rural schooling and school travel also commonly uses purposive strategies to focus on youth directly affected by long commutes or lack of transport options (Garnham et al., 2020; Calverley et al., 2020).

## **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by four central questions: (1) What is it like studying in a far-flung place? (2) What difficulties do you face because of distance? (3) How do you deal with this difficulty in your studies? and (4) What can you recommend to your fellow students facing the same situations?

Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable to the participants, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in Philippine phenomenological studies to elicit detailed, flexible narratives while maintaining focus on key aspects of the phenomenon (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024). International qualitative work on students' commuting and rural schooling similarly relies on semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions to capture perceptions of distance, safety, and coping (Calverley et al., 2020; Ako-Arrey et al., 2021).

Field notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews to record non-verbal cues, contextual details, and the researcher's initial reflections. Such notes support thick description and aid in the interpretation of participants' accounts, a practice recommended in qualitative research standards and applied in recent local and international studies on education in challenging contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Garnham et al., 2020).

## **Data Analysis**

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following a phenomenological orientation. First, the researcher read and reread the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the data, then identified significant statements related to students' experiences of distance and schooling. These statements were coded and clustered into meaning units, which were subsequently organized into broader themes depicting the essence of the participants' lived experiences. This process is consistent with the thematic procedures described by Braun and Clarke and adapted in Philippine phenomenological studies on far-flung schooling contexts (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Gumapac, 2025). International studies on rural students' school travel and educational barriers also use iterative coding and theme development to capture patterns in participants' narratives (Calverley et al., 2020; Garnham et al., 2020).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed several strategies. Member checking was conducted by sharing emerging themes and interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative research and rural education was used to examine coding decisions, challenge assumptions, and refine theme labels. Maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions, memos, and theme revisions also contributed to transparency, echoing strategies documented in recent local and international qualitative research on education in remote or marginalized settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Ako-Arrey et al., 2021).

## **RESULTS**

Four overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) "A long and risky journey to school," (2) "Distance as a source of academic and emotional strain," (3) "Enduring hardships for family and future," and (4) "Collective advice: keep going despite the distance."

### **Theme 1: A long and risky journey to school at Salawagan National High School during monsoon season**

Participants described their daily travel to school as physically exhausting and often dangerous, particularly during the rainy season. They recounted walking or riding motorcycles on muddy, rocky, or slippery roads, facing the risk of landslides, overflowing rivers, and accidents. Several students shared that when it rains, roads become “unpassable and muddy,” bridges are submerged, and motorcycles get flat tires or break down, forcing them to walk long distances. These narratives mirror local accounts of students in mountainous and far-flung areas who must traverse unsafe paths and endure long travel times to attend classes (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; The GUIDON, 2024).

### **Theme 2: Distance as a source of academic and emotional strain**

The students reported that distance commonly led to chronic tardiness, occasional absences, and difficulty participating fully in school activities. Many described waking up very early yet still arriving late to class due to long travel time, bad weather, or transport problems. Distance also affected their ability to buy project materials and school supplies, as they had to go to town centers, incur additional expenses, and risk traveling on unsafe roads. One participant explicitly linked the burden of distance to feelings of “depression” and thoughts of stopping school, highlighting the emotional toll of their situation. These findings resonate with local and international evidence that long distance and poor transport infrastructure contribute to absenteeism, lower engagement, and psychological stress among students in remote communities (DepEd Region I, 2022; Garnham et al., 2020).

### **Theme 3: "Endurance, mirrors resilience among Salawagan learners pursuing family upliftment."**

Despite these challenges, participants expressed a strong commitment to continue their studies, often framing endurance of hardship as necessary to achieve their dreams and help their families. Students repeatedly mentioned “persevering,” “enduring everything,” and keeping their focus on a better future as motivations to keep attending school even when tired, late, or without allowance. For many, educational aspiration and the desire to lift their family out of hardship provided meaning to the daily struggle with distance. This theme aligns with Philippine and international literature showing that rural youth frequently view education as a pathway to improved livelihoods and are willing to endure significant hardship to remain in school (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Ako-Arrey et al., 2021).

### **Theme 4: Collective advice—keep going despite the distance**

Participants offered advice to peers in similar situations that emphasized persistence, time management, and faith. They encouraged fellow students to “keep going,” wake up early to avoid lateness, bring raincoats and protective coverings for school materials, save allowance for school needs, and consider boarding arrangements

when feasible. Several students highlighted the importance of prayer, trust in God, and viewing current difficulties as temporary hardships that will eventually lead to a “comfortable life” after finishing school. These recommendations reflect a blend of practical coping strategies and spiritual or value-based orientations, echoing patterns noted in other Philippine qualitative studies where students draw on religiosity, family support, and peer help to navigate educational adversity (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024).

## DISCUSSION

The findings illuminate how distance to school is experienced not merely as a physical measurement but as a complex, multifaceted hardship that shapes students’ daily routines, emotional states, and educational trajectories. Consistent with DepEd Region I’s documentation of schoolless barangays and the negative effects of extended catchment distances on attendance and completion, participants’ accounts show that long and risky travel often results in lateness, fatigue, and sometimes absence from school (DepEd Region I, 2022). At the same time, the data underscore the emotional burden of distance, including fear of accidents, worry about road conditions, and even depressive feelings associated with the repetitive strain of travel and the temptation to leave school.

This study also extends existing literature by foregrounding students’ resilience and meaning-making in the face of distance-related challenges. While previous local research has highlighted infrastructural deficits and access issues, it has less frequently examined how learners interpret hardship as part of their journey toward personal and familial upliftment (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Gumapac, 2025). Participants’ narratives of enduring hardship “for my family” and “for my dreams” show how educational aspirations and family-oriented values become powerful motivators that reframe distance as a test to be overcome rather than an insurmountable barrier. This resonates with international qualitative work where rural youth describe education as a vehicle for future mobility and are willing to navigate substantial obstacles to stay in school (Ako-Arrey et al., 2021; Garnham et al., 2020).

The students’ practical coping strategies and peer-oriented advice also highlight the role of individual and community agency in mitigating the effects of structural constraints. Waking up earlier, sharing information with classmates, using improvised protection for school materials, and considering boarding near school are micro-level responses that partially buffer the impact of long distance and poor roads. Findings from Salawagan National High School students extend DepEd data on schoolless barangays, urging transport subsidies and road improvements for far-flung learners in Bukidnon. However, these strategies cannot fully substitute for systemic interventions such as improved rural roads, safe bridges, transport assistance, and the establishment of more accessible schools in GIDAs (DepEd Region I, 2022; Dimamay & Anoring, 2024). Thus, the findings point to the need for policy and program responses that combine infrastructure development with learner-centered support, including flexible scheduling during severe weather, psycho-social support for students experiencing stress, and targeted assistance for those living farthest from school.

Finally, the study contributes conceptually by framing distance as both a barrier and a context for the formation of resilience, agency, and collective hope among students in far-flung communities. Future research could build on this by comparing experiences across different regions or school types, integrating quantitative measures of travel time and academic outcomes, and examining how gender, disability, or household responsibilities intersect with distance-related challenges in GIDAs.

## **Conclusions**

Salawagan National High School students do not merely endure distance, they transform it. What emerges from muddy roads, swollen rivers, and chronic exhaustion is not defeat, but extraordinary resilience forged through family dreams and unyielding faith. This study reveals geographical isolation as both formidable barrier and crucible of character, where junior high learners from Bukidnon's far-flung sitios and barangays reframe perilous commutes as sacred tests of perseverance.

Their voices shatter the silence of Department of Education's schoolless barangay statistics, proving that when structural gaps meet human agency, equity becomes possible. Walking the long road to education, these students demonstrate that targeted support can convert geographical disadvantage into profound purpose—not survival, but triumph.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are given:

DepEd Bukidnon and Quezon LGU should implement monthly transport subsidies for all Salawagan National High School students from remote sitios and barangays, gravel-pave 5 km priority roads, reinforce three flood-prone bridges, and adopt weather-adaptive 8:30 AM monsoon scheduling to eliminate tardiness, safety risks, and dropout triggers illuminated across all four themes.

Salawagan National High School administration should establish weekly 45-minute resilience circles every Wednesday, addressing depression through students' own faith-based coping—and create three satellite supply stations in outer barangays, ending material quests that double travel burdens.

Future research must expand through multi-school Bukidnon studies correlating travel time with GPA/dropout rates across five GIDA high schools, plus gender-disaggregated analysis factoring household chores' intersection with commute barriers. These moral imperatives, born from 15 students' lived truths, transform phenomenological revelation into measurable educational justice.

## Compliance With Ethical Standards

Ethical clearance was sought from the appropriate institutional review body, and permission was obtained from school authorities prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from participants and, for minors, from their parents or guardians, with assent obtained from the students. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports to protect confidentiality, following ethical practices reported in Philippine and international qualitative studies involving minors and vulnerable groups in education (Dimamay & Anoring, 2024; Calverley et al., 2020).

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