

Beyond School Walls: Education in School-less Communities

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Education is commonly defined as the development of an individual's capacities, enabling them to interact with and shape their environment while fulfilling their social responsibilities (Dewey, n.d.). This perspective is echoed by Pestalozzi (2022), who described education as the natural, harmonious, and progressive cultivation of a person's innate abilities. Together, these philosophies underscore the central role of formal schooling in structuring learning experiences that equip students with essential knowledge, skills, and values for meaningful participation in society.

In the Philippines, the 1987 Constitution enshrines education as a fundamental right for every citizen. To uphold this mandate, the government implemented the Education for All (EFA) Plan in 2006, which sought to improve access to quality basic education by 2015. Its primary goal was to ensure that all learners attain the competencies required for functional literacy.

However, one persistent barrier to achieving this vision is the prevalence of “school-less” community areas where no schools exist. The absence of educational institutions in these communities significantly restricts access to learning and delays the academic development of many children.

The magnitude of this challenge is evident in Department of Education Region I data (2022), which reports that out of 3,267 barangays in the region, 989 (30.27%) do not have an elementary school, and only 564 barangays are served by secondary schools. As a result, students from underserved areas often travel considerable distances to attend classes, while some are effectively excluded from education altogether (Villar, 2021). For instance, in the District of Numancia in Region VI, although there are at least 12 elementary schools, Barangay Tabangka remains a school-less community. The nearest option for students is the Numancia Integrated School in the Division of Aklan. According to the Punong Barangay, learners from Tabangka must travel either to Barangay Poblacion in Numancia or Barangay Bugasongan in Lezo to access basic education services.

The School-less Community in the Philippines

The literature highlights the legal foundations and government initiatives underpinning Philippine education, particularly Republic Act No. 9155, which guarantees every Filipino child access to quality basic education. This Act is reinforced by constitutional mandates and by national programs such as the Education for All (EFA) Plan, which aimed to ensure basic competencies and functional literacy for all Filipinos by 2015. At the same time, studies consistently point to the negative consequences of

distance between learners' homes and schools, including tardiness, absenteeism, poor concentration in class, hunger, and sleep deprivation.

Recent empirical research deepens this perspective. A study by the University of Eastern Philippines (2022) identifies transportation challenges such as the unavailability of vehicles and financial constraints as significant barriers to learners' timely attendance and overall academic performance. Complementary findings from the Department of Education Regional Office I reveal persistent gaps in school access, with many barangays lacking elementary schools altogether. These conditions have contributed to higher dropout rates, largely attributed to prohibitive transportation costs and the absence of proximate learning facilities. Similarly, Khalil (2013) documents how urban environments shape children's commuting patterns, while Okongo et al. (2015) emphasize that equitable access to adequate learning resources is vital for advancing inclusive education.

A substantial body of scholarship underscores the detrimental impact of long commuting distances on academic outcomes. Florida (2019) shows that extended commuting times disrupt students' sleep cycles, thereby lowering academic performance. Adepoju et al. (2011) likewise find that prolonged commutes erode examination performance by limiting study time and diminishing focus. Pata (2013) highlights how commuting time constrains both study and recreation, while Mhiliwa (2015) documents that long travel distances exacerbate tardiness, hunger, and dropout rates particularly among girls ultimately reducing academic achievement. Collectively, these studies reinforce the urgency of addressing geographic barriers to ensure equitable and sustained educational participation.

The absence of schools in many barangays underscores a systemic gap in fulfilling the educational needs of Filipino children. In school-less

communities, learners are either compelled to endure long, costly commutes or are entirely denied access to formal schooling. This reality underscores the importance of long-term programs that establish sustainable school infrastructure in underserved areas. For instance, a Department of Education (DepEd) study in the Ilocos Region identified nearly 1,000 barangays without elementary schools, further entrenching educational disparities in rural settings. In parallel, the DepEd Policy, Planning, and Research Division (PRRD) highlights the need for evidence-based, targeted interventions to address structural inequities and to ensure that no child is left behind due to geographic isolation.

In response, regional initiatives have begun exploring alternatives. As reported by the Philippine News Agency, the DepEd Ilocos Regional Office has recommended the adoption of alternative learning delivery modes in school-less villages, aiming to serve the nearly 30.3% of barangays lacking elementary schools. These efforts stress the importance of partnerships with community leaders and stakeholders to ensure inclusive, quality education. Corroborating this, research by DepEd Region I confirms that geographic barriers exert a direct influence on student attendance and achievement, with higher absenteeism and lower grades among learners who travel longer distances. Edwards (2022) further underscores the role of school transportation in mitigating these challenges, while cautioning that interventions should be strategically targeted to chronically absent learners to maximize attendance and learning outcomes.

The Lived Experiences of Elementary Learners in a School-less Community: A Case Study

This study explored the lived experiences, struggles, and coping mechanisms of elementary learners residing in a school-less community as they pursued access to basic education.

Methodology

A phenomenological research design was employed to interpret and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences. The study focused on six purposively selected elementary learners from Barangay Tabangka, Numancia, Aklan. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) residency in Barangay Tabangka, (b) current enrollment in elementary school, (c) belonging to families experiencing socioeconomic difficulties, (d) willingness to participate, and (e) protection of privacy through the use of pseudonyms. Their demographic profiles included information such as school affiliation, age, and grade level, and participants were identified through records from the nearest school to Barangay Tabangka. Formal permission to conduct the study was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent, District Supervisor, and School Principal. Since the participants were minors, both assent forms and parental consent were obtained.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by a researcher-developed instrument. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed accounts of (1) lived experiences in a school-less community, (2) struggles encountered in accessing basic education, and (3) coping mechanisms employed. The instrument underwent content validation by a panel consisting of a school administrator, a master teacher, and the

researcher's adviser, who reviewed its clarity, grammar, and relevance. Revisions were incorporated prior to finalization.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Responses were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering these into themes, and developing a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. Transcripts were read and re-read to ensure immersion in the data, and findings were returned to participants for validation, thereby strengthening credibility.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Participants were briefed on the objectives, significance, and procedures of the study. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, informed that no monetary or material compensation would be provided, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage. All necessary permissions were obtained, and measures were taken to protect the privacy and welfare of the learners.

Findings

The lived experiences of school-less community learners in Barangay Tabangka, Numancia, Aklan, were shaped by a complex interplay of challenges, contextual factors, and individual coping preferences.

Day-to-day transportation routine. For most school-less community learners, a shared challenge defines their daily routine the necessity of walking to and from school. The absence of motorized transportation transforms the pursuit of education into a rhythmic cadence of footsteps, making the journey itself a significant part of their learning experience. Walking is not merely a physical task but also a mental challenge, testing their endurance and resilience. Yet, within this routine, learners also

discover meaning and connection. One participant, for instance, expressed joy in the companionship of siblings during the daily walk, describing it as an opportunity for camaraderie, laughter, and bonding. In this sense, the journey becomes more than a means to an end; it becomes a shared adventure that fosters warmth amidst the demands of long distances.

Beyond walking, various modes of transportation also come into play. Some learners rely on motorcycles owned by their families, while others make use of rented services such as *habal-habal* (motorbike taxi). These choices extend beyond mere logistics, profoundly shaping learners' comfort, independence, and sense of belonging. Those riding family-owned motorcycles often experience a sense of safety and kinship, intertwining their school journeys with the support of loved ones. Conversely, learners who use rented motorbikes embrace flexibility and accessibility, navigating their paths to education with a growing sense of independence.

Switching from walking to riding a motorbike is more than a practical change; it reflects broader aspects of family dynamics, economic progress, and cultural context. It also signals personal growth, as learners negotiate between dependency and independence in their educational journeys. These daily commutes, whether on foot or by motorbike, carry meanings that extend beyond transportation. They represent resilience, adaptation, and the creation of formative memories that shape learners' perspectives on education.

This finding resonates with Khalil's (2013) observation that increased distances in communities often reduce the likelihood of students walking or biking to school, underscoring how geography, economics, and access to transport shape educational participation.

Proximity to educational resources. Although studying in the town proper offers access to a wider range of resources, participants from the

school-less community expressed a distinct preference for pursuing their education within their own barangay. The central factor behind this choice is proximity. Having a school situated within walking distance of their homes provides not only convenience but also a strong sense of familiarity and belonging. This closeness minimizes the physical and logistical challenges associated with long commutes, making education more integrated into their daily lives.

Even with available transportation options, one participant emphasized the practicality of studying in the barangay rather than in the town proper. Proximity reduces travel time, eases fatigue, and allows learners to maintain stronger ties with their immediate community. While schools in town may present richer educational resources, these advantages are outweighed by the comfort, accessibility, and community connection that local schooling provides. This choice reflects how personal priorities and lifestyle considerations significantly shape learners' educational experiences.

Furthermore, Okongo et al. (2015) argue that the successful implementation of inclusive education depends on the adequate provision of teaching and learning resources. Allocating funds for locally available materials tailored to the needs of learners becomes crucial in ensuring that schools within barangays are not disadvantaged compared to those in urban centers. Thus, proximity not only fosters accessibility but also highlights the importance of resource support in sustaining equitable learning opportunities.

Enjoyable aspects of education. Learners in school-less communities discover happiness in dimensions of education that extend beyond academic study. For instance, in the town school, learning is complemented by the presence of a nearby playground. This space provides

not only physical activity but also a sense of joy that enhances the overall school experience. Such recreational facilities become more than mere leisure outlets; they offer learners a much-needed balance between academic demands and personal well-being.

Similarly, learners who attend schools in their barangay find enjoyment not only within the classroom but also in the surrounding community. The proximity of local stores, for example, adds both practicality and enjoyment to their daily routine, reinforcing the sense that education is integrated into everyday life rather than confined to formal instruction. These seemingly simple features playgrounds, stores, and other accessible amenities contribute meaningfully to a holistic and enriching learning environment. They help ensure that the educational journey is not only informative but also fulfilling and enjoyable.

Learners also derive joy from opportunities outside of direct academic content. A playground, for instance, may serve as a waiting area for children whose parents arrive later, thereby transforming idle time into moments of recreation. This illustrates how physical and social environments influence learners' perceptions of education. For teachers and school leaders, this highlights the importance of recognizing that education extends beyond classroom instruction. Non-academic elements play a pivotal role in shaping learners' overall experience. Learners are most engaged when environments are not only informative but also interesting, inspiring, relevant, and enjoyable. Peer learning further enhances this experience, providing an additional dimension of fulfillment and motivation (Jumuad et al., 2023).

Despite these sources of enjoyment, learners in Barangay Tabangka, Numancia, Aklan, confront multifaceted challenges that shape their educational journey. These include the hardships of daily commuting,

financial constraints, safety concerns, and limited access to learning resources. Such struggles underscore the resilience and determination required of these students to pursue education under demanding conditions. While their accounts reveal significant barriers, they also demonstrate a steadfast commitment to achieving their aspirations, reflecting both the vulnerability and strength inherent in their lived experiences.

Time management and late arrivals. Learners in school-less communities face considerable challenges in managing their daily travel to school. These include the need for early wake-ups, long walks across difficult terrain, and the constant disruption posed by adverse weather conditions. Such difficulties are further compounded by the absence of reliable transportation and the constraints of limited household budgets, which restrict the ability to afford regular fares. In the absence of dependable transport services, many learners are compelled to rely solely on their own physical effort to reach school. The financial strain of securing daily transportation adds another layer of difficulty, often resulting in late arrivals and increased fatigue. This interplay of time, distance, and resource limitations highlights not only the barriers to equitable access but also the resilience and determination of learners who persist despite these adversities. Their experiences underscore the need for policy interventions that address both logistical and financial challenges in order to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Financial considerations. Financial constraints exert a profound influence on learners' educational decisions, often compelling them to study in schools closer to home as a means of reducing transportation expenses. This choice reflects a pragmatic response to limited economic resources and underscores the complex interplay between financial realities and access to education. Such constraints extend beyond transport costs, affecting the

ability of learners to afford daily allowances, gasoline for motorized vehicles, and other incidental school-related expenses. To cope, many learners adopt cost-saving strategies such as studying nearby and bringing packed home-cooked meals. While these measures demonstrate resilience and adaptability, they also highlight the persistent burden of financial challenges. Importantly, financial stress does not remain confined to logistical issues but also impacts learners' well-being and academic performance. Economic difficulties can trigger a cascade of consequences, including health complications and reduced academic achievement, making financial barriers a critical dimension of educational equity that demands urgent attention from both policymakers and school administrators.

Safety concerns during commute. Safety risks further compound the challenges of learners' daily journeys to school. Participants shared experiences of being chased by stray dogs and walking long distances in adverse weather conditions. One learner recalled being pursued by a dog along the road, highlighting the unpredictability and physical dangers they sometimes encounter. Others recounted trudging through heavy rain, arriving at school with soaked clothes and shoes—an ordeal that not only disrupts comfort but also poses health risks. Despite these hazards, learners remain steadfast in their determination to attend school. Their willingness to endure unsafe conditions and physical discomfort illustrates the depth of their commitment to education and the sacrifices they willingly undertake to pursue learning opportunities, regardless of the circumstances.

Difficulties in carrying books. The physical burden of carrying heavy books poses a persistent challenge for many learners. The weight of these materials often influences decisions about whether to bring them to and from school, with some opting to leave their books in the classroom to avoid physical strain. While practical, this choice limits opportunities for

independent study or the completion of assignments at home. Such constraints highlight how seemingly minor physical challenges can significantly shape learners' academic engagement and preparedness.

Limited access to educational resources. In addition to physical burdens, limited access to educational resources particularly reliable internet connectivity emerges as a critical barrier. Many learners lack stable home internet and instead rely on prepaid Piso-WiFi services, which are often slow, unreliable, or inconsistent. This situation underscores the digital divide that disproportionately affects school-less community learners, curtailing their capacity to complete assignments, conduct research, and fully participate in digital learning opportunities. The persistence of such inequities emphasizes the urgency of targeted interventions to strengthen internet infrastructure, expand affordable access, and promote digital inclusion as essential conditions for equitable and high-quality education.

The coping mechanisms of school-less community learners in Barangay Tabangka, Numancia, Aklan, reflect resilience, collaboration, and resourcefulness. Confronted with multiple financial and logistical barriers, these learners demonstrate a capacity to adapt by cultivating a positive mindset and prioritizing the intrinsic value of education. Their strategies often include collective efforts within families and peer groups, as well as the use of practical, low-cost solutions to sustain daily participation in school. Such behaviors highlight not only their determination to persist but also the broader social and cultural practices that enable them to transform constraints into opportunities for learning continuity.

Family and community support. Family members, particularly uncles and fathers, play a pivotal role in sustaining the educational aspirations of learners. Their support extends beyond moral encouragement to practical contributions, most notably through the provision of motorbike

rides. Several participants reported a recent increase in such assistance, highlighting a growing trend of active familial involvement in mitigating commuting challenges. This form of support not only eases the physical burden of travel but also symbolizes a collective commitment to education, reinforcing the idea that learning is a shared responsibility within the household and community. As Edwards (2022) notes, access to reliable school transportation positively influences student attendance, reducing the risk of chronic absenteeism. In this context, the provision of motorbike rides by family members operates as both a cost-effective transportation solution and a manifestation of solidarity, reflecting the collaborative effort required to safeguard learners' academic continuity.

Positive attitude and adaptation. Despite facing substantial challenges, learners demonstrate remarkable commitment to schooling by maintaining a strong focus on attendance and continuous learning. Their adaptability is evident in the creative ways they navigate daily obstacles, refusing to succumb to difficult circumstances. Instead, they approach each challenge as an opportunity for growth, cultivating resilience and optimism. This perseverance not only underscores their dedication to education but also inspires others in the community, illustrating how a positive mindset can function as a powerful coping mechanism.

The decision of some learners to continue attending school even without an allowance further reflects their intrinsic motivation and belief in the transformative value of education. Such persistence highlights the depth of their appreciation for learning and their determination to complete their studies despite material hardships. In this way, learners embody resilience as both a personal strength and a social signal, demonstrating that intrinsic motivation and a growth-oriented perspective are critical drivers of academic success under conditions of adversity.

Financial assistance and collaboration. Learners actively work with their families to address financial difficulties, often sharing responsibilities to ensure that schooling remains possible. Children assist their single mothers, while families pool limited resources such as transportation costs to ease the burden. This teamwork reflects a culture of unity and mutual support, where each family member contributes according to their capacity. From an early age, these learners gain an understanding of the challenges of earning a living and willingly strive to contribute, reinforcing the strength of family bonds in sustaining educational pursuits.

Beyond the family, community members also play a role in providing support, whether through transportation, monetary aid, or other forms of assistance. Such collaborative efforts help learners sustain their studies, despite limited means. However, financial constraints remain a significant barrier: some learners continue to struggle with school-related expenses, while others lack access to essential learning equipment. Parents with limited earning capacity particularly those affected by disabilities face greater difficulties in sustaining their children's education. As Moore et al. (2021) note, the inability to provide financial support reduces educational quality, with many families finding it a daunting task to secure even the most basic needs, such as food, school supplies, and other necessities.

Practical solutions for daily commute. Learners adopt creative strategies to cope with everyday transportation challenges, demonstrating both adaptability and determination to continue their education. When gasoline for motorbikes commonly used in their communities becomes unavailable, they turn to cost-effective alternatives such as walking. This choice reflects a proactive mindset, ensuring that transportation difficulties do not disrupt school attendance.

In acknowledging the recurring issue of fuel shortages, learners illustrate a willingness to embrace walking as a practical and sustainable solution. Their readiness to adjust highlights not only resourcefulness but also a deep commitment to education. By treating challenges as opportunities to adapt, these learners model resilience and cost-conscious decision-making, showing that even limited resources need not become insurmountable barriers to schooling.

Resourcefulness in income generation. Learners demonstrate resilience by engaging in various income-generating activities that provide financial support for their education while fostering independence and empowerment. Their initiatives include planting vegetables, collecting items for sale (such as white hairs), cleaning motorcycles for payment, and participating in small community-based jobs like Saturday cleaning. These efforts not only supplement household income but also help cover essential school-related expenses.

Through these activities, learners showcase creativity and determination in utilizing available resources to meet financial needs. Their willingness to contribute reflects a sense of responsibility and agency, proving that even at a young age, they actively seek solutions to sustain their education. By sharing the burden of economic challenges with their families, they highlight a culture of collective effort and commitment, ensuring that the goal of completing schooling remains attainable despite limited means.

The Roadmap Ahead

The lived experiences of school-less community learners in Barangay Tabangka, Numancia, Aklan, reveal a dynamic interplay of challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal motivations. Daily

commuting difficulties, limited access to educational resources, and the joys they still find in learning collectively shape their educational journey. These narratives highlight not only the resilience and adaptability of learners but also the urgency of providing systemic support tailored to their realities.

Understanding these multifaceted experiences is crucial in designing responsive and targeted interventions. By recognizing both the barriers and the strengths within this community, stakeholders can create sustainable solutions that bridge gaps in access, enhance learning continuity, and empower learners to achieve their aspirations despite adversity.

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